

CULTURE AS CATALYST

Assessing Bodø2024 European Capital of Culture





Midsummer June 22, 2024 | Photo: Airida Bekeryte

Executive summary

In September 2019, Bodø city was awarded the prestigious title of European Capital of Culture (ECOC) for 2024—the first city north of the Arctic Circle to receive this designation. This marked the beginning of a transformative journey for Bodø and Nordland County, positioning culture as a catalyst for regional development, international collaboration, and civic engagement.

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the achievements, challenges, and impacts of Bodø2024 ECOC, examining whether and how the stated objectives were fulfilled and contributed to cultural, social, and economic transformation. The evaluation addresses the achievement of strategic objectives outlined in the Bodø2024 bid book and the European Commission's ECOC guidelines in relation to five priority areas: 1) Children and young people, 2) Growing our audience, 3) Connections and capacity, 4) City development and 5) Freedom of expression.

The report integrates quantitative and qualitative data-driven evidence from surveys, interviews, social media analysis, program events data, and innovative tools such as the People's Jury, digital twin simulations, and AI-assisted media analysis. Based on 15 scientific reports prepared by the MONITOR2024 research team, it provides insights from multiple stakeholder perspectives: local citizens, artists, cultural professionals, upper secondary school and university students, volunteers, Norwegian media, etc.

Key figures defining Bodø2024 ECOC

Bodø2024 was structured around the concept of ARCTICulation, with cultural programming organized into five seasonal chapters reflecting Arctic rhythms: *Here Comes the Sun, Spring Optimism, Midsummer Madness, Autumn Storms, and Arctic Light*.

Key highlights include:

- **434 program events** delivered during the title year, amounting to **4,500 cumulative event-days**. The program was implemented in a decentralized manner, with **38% of events organized outside Bodø**.
- **114 cultural projects** supported, including flagship initiatives such as *UNG2024* (youth empowerment), *Frivillig2024* (volunteer engagement), and projects on Sámi culture and ecological economics.
- **12,300 performer engagements**, including **3,000 international performers** from **57 countries**.
- **Over 700 partnerships** formed across cultural, educational, and business sectors.
- Audience participation estimated at 300,000–355,000.
- **Volunteer engagement** counted **4,500 participations**, including **600 individuals** from diverse backgrounds (36 languages represented).
- **Bodø2024 invested approximately NOK 135 million into the cultural program**, resulting in a **total cultural budget of NOK 331 million**. This demonstrates a multiplier effect of 2.45 (every NOK 1 from Bodø2024 generated NOK 2.45 in total funding).
- Bodø2024 boosted tourism, with **hotel overnight stays in Bodø increasing by 34%** from 2023 to 2024, including a **59% rise in international stays**.

Summary of achievements and challenges related to five strategic priority areas

Empowering Youth Through Culture: Children and Young People.

Bodø2024 aimed to place youth at the heart of cultural life, empower them as co-creators, and reduce outmigration by making Nordland more attractive for young people. UNG2024 funded 77 youth-led projects (NOK 4 million distributed), engaging 300 youth representatives and reaching over 10,000 young people. In addition, twenty percent of program events targeted children and youth, and 52% encouraged active participation. Surveys show that participating youth reported increased confidence, skills, and cultural engagement, with satisfaction scores up to 6.7 out of 7. However, cultural engagement fosters a sense of local belonging but cannot prevent outmigration, as structural drivers such as employment and housing remain decisive. Municipal budget cuts in 2024 further threatened cultural and educational infrastructure. Thus, culture can complement retention strategies only if integrated with broader rural and urban development policies.

Expanding Cultural Participation: Growing Our Audience.

Bodø2024 aimed to increase audience numbers by 30%, engage underrepresented groups, and foster cultural democracy. Program events attracted 300,000–355,000 participations, with 38% held outside Bodø, boosting regional engagement. 43% percent of events targeted specific groups (youth, minorities, people with disabilities), and 82% were physically accessible. On the achievements side, cultural participation was broadened

and co-creation increased (52% of events involved active audience participation). Challenges included limited outreach, e.g. 60% of Peoples' Jury members never attended a Bodø2024 event, as well as low digital accessibility (only 10% of events streamed online). Communication strategies of Bodø2024 were perceived as unclear. As implication, audience gains achieved during the title year risk being temporary without proper institutional anchoring, improved outreach, and stronger digital inclusion.

Building Cultural Infrastructure: Connections and Capacity.

Bodø2024 sought to strengthen cultural networks, professional skills, and international collaboration among artists and cultural workers. 87% of surveyed organizers reported that their event contributed to skill development, and 70% noted improved networking. Bodø2024 facilitated over 700 partnerships, and 10% of events received EU co-funding. Projects such as Frivillig2024 and Ecological Economics institutionalized volunteer networks and introduced new school subjects. International collaboration was strengthened through projects like De(con)fining and Via Querinissima. Achievements in the area included expanded networks, improved project management skills, and increased access to external funding among artists and cultural workers. As of challenges, these included limited outreach beyond Bodø, modest size of grants, and unclear project selection processes. On the impact side, the long-term sustainability of established networks remains uncertain as continuity depends on municipal support and integration into long-term municipal strategies.

Culture as a Driver of Urban Growth: City Development.

Bodø2024 aimed to position Bodø as a model for culture-based urban development, attract talent, and integrate culture into city planning. During the title year, Bodø2024 activated urban spaces, with 63% of organizers using new venues. Tourism growth was significant, with hotel stays in Bodø increasing by 34% (including a 59% rise in international overnight stays). Economic simulations done by Bodø2024 team predict that cultural spending during 2024 could generate NOK 1.24 billion over 15 years and support potential population growth of 2,000 residents by 2036 if the legacy is sustained. Achievements included increased cultural vibrancy and visibility, symbolically integrating culture into urban identity. However, there is no evidence of formal integration of culture into urban planning, and data on talent retention or creative industry growth is so far limited. Cultural programming had an important symbolic value, but structural impact requires stronger alignment between cultural policies and urban planning frameworks.

Advancing Cultural Democracy: Freedom of Expression.

Bodø2024 aimed to promote dialogue on democratic values, safeguard artistic freedom, and strengthen European identity. Some program events addressed themes of tolerance and inclusion. Sámi representation (11% of all program events) sparked national debate, amplifying visibility but also controversy. Social media became a key arena for discourse, revealing tensions around Sámi identity and representation. When it comes to achievements, raising public awareness of freedom of expression and integrating democratic themes into education (e.g., the new subject "Ecological Economics") should be especially noticed. Challenges included polarized debates about Sámi representation in Bodø2024 exposing deeper social divides. Bodø2024 signaled potential for Nordland to become a best-practice case for cultural democracy, but sustainability depends on establishing formal legacy structures and institutionalization of dialogue platforms.

SUMMARY: AN OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Bodø2024 was the first European Capital of Culture north of the Arctic Circle, aiming to drive regional development, civic engagement, and international visibility through five strategic priorities: youth engagement, audience growth, capacity building, urban development, and freedom of expression. The initiative delivered significant short-term cultural activation, fostering civic pride, international visibility, and strengthening Bodø's cultural identity. It successfully institutionalized volunteer networks, youth programs, and cultural education initiatives while demonstrating Northern Norway's ability to host large-scale cultural events. Key strengths included youth engagement, expanded partnerships, and capacity-building efforts.

However, the project faced some notable challenges. Social tensions emerged around freedom of expression, particularly concerning Sámi representation. Cultural engagement helped mitigate outmigration concerns but could not substitute for broader socio-economic strategies. Limited outreach, unclear communication, fragile legacy structures, and weak integration with urban planning and employment policies are probably most important factors that will constrain long-term impact of Bodø2024. The report concludes that lasting transformation depends on sustained political will, adequate funding, and strong institutional anchoring, alongside strategic alignment with Nordland and Bodø's structural development policies beyond 2024.



Norwegian Street League | Photo: David Engmo

Recommendations for Local and Regional Policymakers

Recommendation 1: Integrate cultural and economic development for youth.

Future cultural initiatives should link closely to job creation and capacity building for young people by creating cultural hubs that also serve as co-working and innovation spaces. Combining cultural vitality with employment, housing, and social infrastructure can help reverse demographic decline and foster youth retention. Policies should move beyond passive “We See-culture” events toward active participation and co-creation, supported by training, mentorship, and youth-led projects, supporting so-called “See Me-culture.” For an explanation of the terms please see chapter 5.1.

Recommendation 2: Support professional networks of artists and cultural workers.

Artists need stronger infrastructure and support to sustain networks built during Bodø2024. Establishing

multi-purpose cultural houses with ateliers, guest housing, and public interaction spaces can foster collaboration and visibility. Continued education in funding, sponsorship, and project management will strengthen artists’ capacity to build national and international networks.

Recommendation 3: Maintain and expand cultural volunteer engagement.

Volunteers are a vital resource that can be activated more strategically to support cultural projects and artists. Municipalities should track and re-engage past volunteers, offer skill-building and recognition, and recruit youth through schools and clubs. Rebranding volunteering as “cultural crew” can make it appealing to young people and foster a sense of belonging and ownership.

Implications and Lessons Learned for Future ECOC Programs

Implication 1: Embed cultural development in regional and urban strategies.

Future ECOC goals should align with broader social, economic, and urban development plans, not just cultural strategies. Cultural investment improves attractiveness but cannot replace structural policies on housing, education, and employment. Art and culture programs must be explicitly integrated into regional development frameworks.

Implication 2: Plan early for ECOC sustainability and legacy.

The ECOC year should be treated as a catalyst for long-term transformation, not a one-off event. Clear mechanisms for sustaining cultural investments and embedding arts education and community partnerships are essential. Legacy planning and success indicators should be prioritized in the bid book.

Implication 3: Use data-driven methods for impact measurement.

Evaluation should go beyond post-event reporting and employ data-driven techniques like correlation and regression analysis. This enables evidence-based governance, better resource allocation, and targeted interventions. Future ECOCs should collaborate with evaluators early and ensure access to multiple databases for robust data collection.

Implication 4: Ensure transparent governance.

Clear communication of funding priorities and expected benefits is crucial to avoid perceptions of elitism or misuse of funds. Transparency in resource allocation and proactive outreach through digital platforms and social media can build trust. Success depends not only on how well culture-related activities are implemented but also on how decisions about those activities are explained and communicated.

Implication 5: Balance diverse cultural preferences.

Programming should reflect varied audience segments by combining high-profile events with grassroots initiatives. Early audience segmentation and flexible formats—such as family-friendly, local, and traditional events—are key to inclusivity. ECOCs create civic pride among citizens, boosting identity and reputation, but without direct participation, cultural programs risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

Implication 6: Comparative evaluations are highly beneficial.

Cross-city and longitudinal comparisons of ECOCs help identify common key performance indicators (KPI) and best evaluation practices. Collaborative evaluation during the title year among ECOCs can strengthen learning and improve future strategies. Shared frameworks allow ECOCs to benefit from previous experiences and enhance program effectiveness.

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List of abbreviations

ECOC European Capital of Culture

EC European Commission

KPIs Key performance indicators

ToC Theory of change

Bodø2024 IKS The publicly owned intermunicipal company that was formed to run Bodø2024 ECOC initiative





Foreword by MONITOR2024 reference group

It has been a privilege for us to accompany the MONITOR2024 research group on this journey to evaluate Bodø2024 - Europe's first Capital of Culture north of the Arctic Circle - and to witness how a rigorous, stakeholder-oriented evaluation can deepen understanding of culture's role in regional development, identity, and democratic life. From the outset, the team anchored its work in a conceptual model that is explorative, descriptive, and explanatory, pairing the European Commission's evaluation guidelines with a Theory of Change (ToC) translated into clear inputs–outputs–outcomes–impacts and implemented through a social auditing approach.

**BEATRIZ GARCIA, ODD HENRIKSEN, MARTIN PIBER,
HILMAR ROMMETVEDT, ANNA MARGRETHE WELLE**

Reference Group members, December 2025

This methodological mix and an openness to lived experience proved essential in a year where culture was not only programmed but continuously debated, negotiated, and interpreted across the public sphere.

Two methodological innovations deserve particular recognition, and we believe they constitute a legacy that sets a new standard for evaluating cultural mega-events. First, rather than reducing the 'public' to attendance numbers, MONITOR2024 used a Peoples' Jury to listen to how different citizens made sense of the ECOC year. The Jury illuminated four clusters of

cultural (non-)consumers: Community Anchors, Cultural Enthusiasts, Balanced Participants, and Pragmatic Skeptics - revealing that support or opposition often moved independently of event attendance, and that visibility, prestige, and civic pride could matter as much as direct participation. This 'participation paradox' reframes how we interpret impact: cultural value circulates through narratives, recognition, and belonging as much as through tickets scanned and seats filled. By giving citizens a structured voice and by analysing the heterogeneity of their responses - including the notable share of jurors who did not attend events - the People's Jury advanced democratic evaluation practice and provided actionable insights for an audience development in and the program design of future ECOCs.

Second, the development of a digital twin of the city: The team's use of agent-based modelling to simulate socio-



Youth Gathering 2024 | Photo: Tine Hole

economic scenarios - and to contrast a Bodø with and without Bodø2024 - added rare foresight to an evaluation typically confined to short-term ex-post description. Updated with actual data from 2024, the simulations indicated that observed outcomes in key areas exceeded the original success scenario and enabled to draft a quantified estimation of plausible long-term effects, including potential population trajectories and fiscal-economic implications. However, we have to keep in mind, that the transition from cultural vibrancy to structural urban development depends on a further policy alignment and more institutional anchoring in the future. This coupling of a digital twin with real-time data and transparent assumptions offers a replicable template for evidence-based cultural policy.

In addition to this, we would also draw attention to the team's critically-informed use of AI. AI can be a useful tool to analyse big data – such as media coverage and visitor movements. However, the MONITOR2024 team has demonstrated the need for human intelligence and a detailed interrogation of algorithmically generated findings. AI as a research and evaluation tool needs careful instruction and strict quality assurance of the output. Future ECoCs will find in MONITOR2024 an

excellent referent of best practice in this respect.

The power of these innovations lies in how they were embedded in a broader, pluralistic methodology. Alongside surveys, interviews, and statistical analyses, the team deployed netnography, AI-assisted media analysis, press and social media discourse analysis, telecom mobility data, and extensive program-event mapping. Altogether, this creates a multi-angled view of cultural events induced change – as well as its limits. This comprehensive design captured not only the scale of cultural activation but also the tensions and blind spots surrounding it: the fragility of legacy without institutional anchoring; the need for better outreach and digital accessibility; and the importance of transparent governance to address perceptions of elitism or opacity.

Critically, MONITOR2024 confronted the challenges around freedom of expression and Sámi representation with analytical clarity and balance. The evaluation documents how debates about identity, inclusion, and democratic values were elevated, while also revealing deep social tensions and polarized reactions, especially in a social media context. The evaluation neither glosses over conflict nor reduces it to noise; instead, it treats

public debate as constitutive of cultural democracy and as a vital arena where meaning, fairness, and belonging are continuously forged.

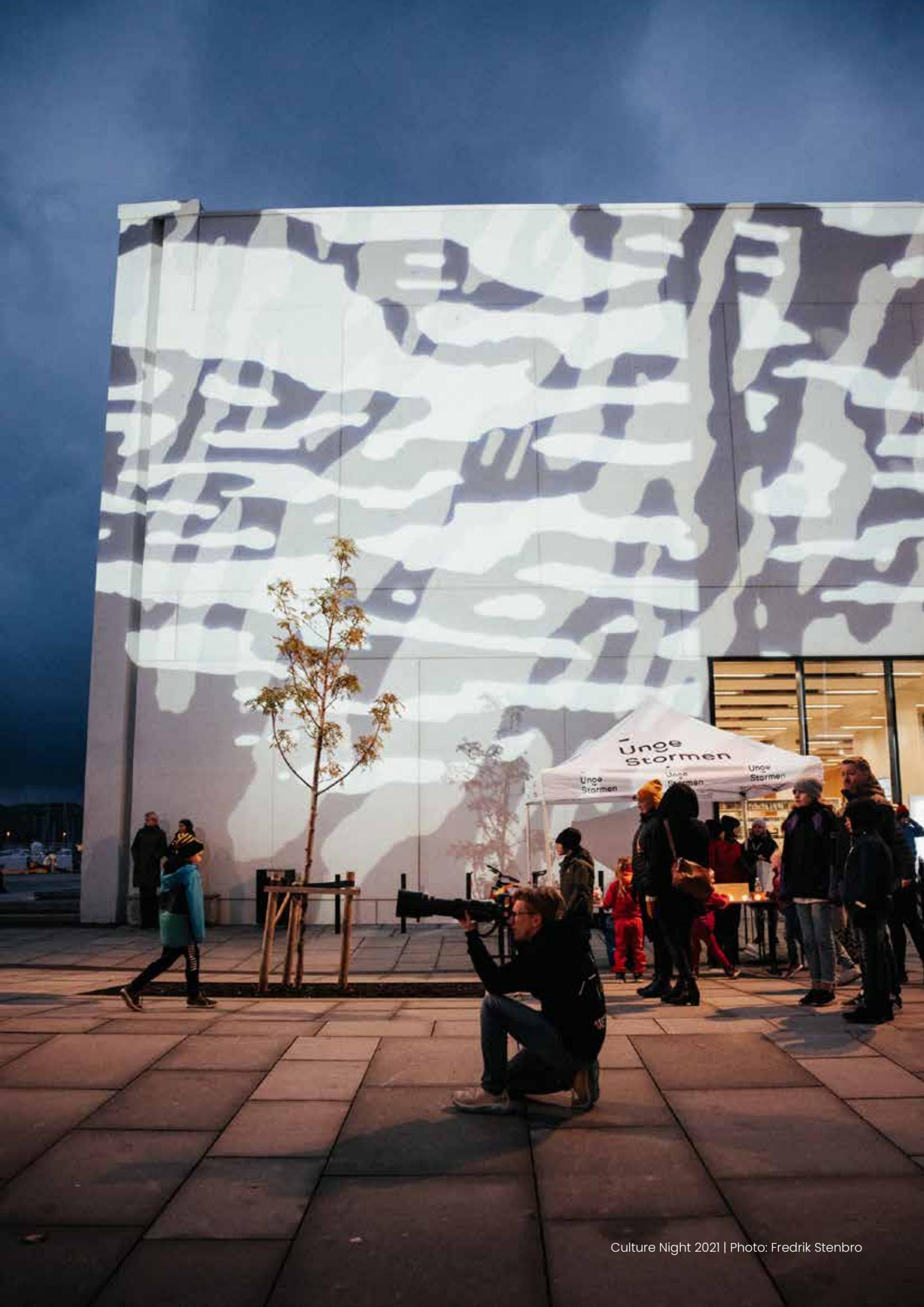
The report's central lesson is both pragmatic and hopeful: culture alone cannot offset structural drivers like employment and housing, but it can meaningfully shape place attractiveness, civic pride, and identity - provided it is integrated with broader development strategies and supported by sustained political will and resources. This is consistent with the ToC that guided the evaluation, which envisions cultural investment translating into durable, place-based gains when outputs reach sufficient scale and are anchored in institutions and policy.

We warmly congratulate the MONITOR2024 team on the excellence of their results, the quality of their evidence, and the courage of their goal-setting-approach and interpretation. We are especially grateful for the way the team translated complex findings into actionable implications for audience development, capacity building, urban integration, and transparent governance. We extend our sincere thanks to Anatoli Bourmistrov, the head of the team. His leadership and guidance enabled an independent and academically rigorous evaluation that nonetheless remained deeply attentive to people, place, and dialogue. The social auditing frame ensured that stakeholders were not merely studied but engaged

as active agents in meaning-making and evaluation, honouring the principles of openness and democracy at the heart of this work.

Looking ahead, we believe that the integration of a People's Jury and agent-based modelling - embedded within a ToC-guided, social-audit architecture - constitutes a new legacy for ECoC evaluation practice. Overall, this approach enables cities to hear diverse publics, anticipate long-term consequences, and align cultural investment with structural development. In our view, this is not only a successful evaluation of Bodø2024 - it is a blueprint for how future ECoCs can integrate democratic participation, data-informed foresight, and communicative transparency into their own monitoring and learning systems. However, the conclusions are necessarily provisional, as the team itself notes that follow-up studies are required to capture long-term effects beyond 2024, limiting the strength of causal claims at this stage.

On behalf of the Reference Group, we commend MONITOR2024 for setting this benchmark and for offering a model that offers good connecting points for other ECoCs and is as well attuned to local specificities. The work done here strengthens not just the understanding of a title year - it strengthens the very craft of cultural evaluation.



Culture Night 2021 | Photo: Fredrik Stenbro

1 . I N T R O - D U C T I O N

In September 2019, Bodø was awarded the prestigious title of European Capital of Culture (ECOC) for the year 2024 – the first city north of the Arctic Circle to receive this designation. This marked the beginning of a transformative journey for Bodø and Nordland County, positioning culture as a catalyst for regional development, international collaboration, and civic engagement. The Bodø2024 ECOC initiative was not merely a cultural celebration; it was a strategic intervention aimed at strengthening cultural infrastructure, fostering inclusive participation across diverse communities and reversing demographic decline.

The European Commission's (EC) guidelines for ECOC evaluations emphasize the importance of assessing both tangible and intangible impacts across social, cultural, and economic domains (European Commission, 2018). In line with these principles, Bodø2024 IKS¹ partnered with Nord University to ensure an independent and academically rigorous evaluation process. In addition, part of the allocated budget for research driven evaluation came from Nord university to assure an academic outcome from the evaluation and monitor process. Following that, the Monitor2024 research group was established in 2021 and has since then produced a series of reports culminating in this final evaluation report (see Appendix for an overview of MONITOR2024 reports).

The evaluation framework integrates both descriptive and explanatory models. The descriptive component

maps the changes that Bodø2024 ECOC has produced against key performance indicators (KPIs) aligned with Bodø2024's own objectives and EC's criteria. The explanatory component draws on social auditing, agent-based modelling, and discourse framing to assess stakeholder engagement, long-term societal impacts, and the theory of change (ToC) underpinning Bodø2024 ECOC.

As stated in Bodø2024 ECOC bid book (Bodø2024, 2019), strategic objectives of Bodø2024 included five key areas of intended impacts:

1. to place children and young people at the heart of cultural life in Bodø and Nordland;
2. to expand cultural participation across all demographic groups, with a particular focus on engaging those currently underrepresented in cultural activities;
3. to act as a game changer for cultural and community life in Nordland with the aim to build cultural capacity across the region through collaboration and knowledge sharing;
4. to position Bodø and Nordland as a modern, internationally profiled region that integrates culture into urban development; and
5. to develop a platform for cultural democracy, addressing threats to freedom of speech and artistic expression.

¹ A publicly owned intermunicipal company that was formed to run Bodø2024 ECOC initiative"



Culture Night 2021 – Young Stage | Photo : Fredrik Stenbro

The Monitor2024 team interpreted these goals as aiming to use art and culture as a means of creating a society in which people would like to live, work, and contribute. The core idea was that art and culture provide enjoyable personal experiences and arenas for interaction, socialization, creativity and bonding. Greater availability and quality of cultural offerings would in turn generate higher demand and higher cultural participation, that is, more socializing and a stronger sense of identity. ECOC Bodø2024 was understood as the catalyst that would activate these mechanisms and thereby contribute to improved living conditions and outlook in life.

This final evaluation report explores the extent to which different objectives of Bodø2024 ECOC were achieved, how different stakeholder groups experienced the impacts, and what lessons can be drawn for future cultural policy and regional development. It provides a comprehensive assessment of Bodø2024 ECOC, not only as a cultural milestone but as a model for inclusive and sustainable transformation in peripheral regions.

This report is designed to serve the needs of multiple stakeholder groups identified in the inception phase (Ref. Inception report). Some of those are listed below:

- **Local citizens:** The report provides insights into how Bodø2024 influenced quality of life, intention to move in/out and local development. We particularly emphasize the importance of how art and culture affect how young people perceive their opportunities for a good life as adults in their home-municipality.
- **Artists and cultural professionals:** The findings offer evidence of cultural appreciation, capacity- and network building, and reputation enhancement. The report can inform future programming, funding applications, and strategic planning.
- **Local businesses:** The evaluation highlights some basic economic impacts, including increased demand and consumption linked to cultural events.
- **Government (on local, regional, national levels):** The report can support policy development by offering evidence of culture's role in regional/urban development.
- **Bodø2024 IKS:** As the organizing body, Bodø2024 IKS can use the report to document its efforts and resource use, demonstrate achievement of objectives, and reflect on Bodø2024 legacy.
- **Current and future ECOCs:** The report summarizes valuable lessons learnt and implications for future cultural initiatives.
- **The European Commission:** The report fulfills the EC's evaluation requirements, offering a structured analysis of how Bodø2024 contributed to ECOC objectives. It supports cross-city learning and benchmarking within the ECOC framework and can be valuable for other ECOCs that will come after 2025.

By providing a transparent, evidence-based account of Bodø2024 ECOC's impacts, this report contributes to accountability for money spent, learning, and strategic development across sectors and stakeholders. It also serves as a reference for future cultural policy, regional planning, and international collaboration.

2 .
B 0 D Ø 2 0 2 4
E C O C I N
N U M B E R S
A N D
P I C T U R E S

ECOCs were established as an intergovernmental European initiative in 1985. Since then, more than sixty cities have been awarded ECOC status. The ECOC concept is considered a powerful tool for cultural development because it is thought to provide unprecedented opportunities to catalyze urban development and change. The main idea for this initiative includes promoting European values and advancing European collaboration and cultural relations. In addition, the preparation for and implementation of ECOC cultural programs during the title year is expected to stimulate positive social and economic development in the city (European Commission, 2018).

2.1. Bodø2024 ECoC's concepts and goals

EC awarded ECOC's status for 2024 to Bodø (Norway), Tartu (Estonia) and Bad Ischl (Austria). For Bodø2024 receiving the ECOC title marked the occasion of the first city north of the Arctic Circle, representing a distinct case of European cultural landscape. In its application, Bodø2024 ECOC was structured around the concept of ARCTICulation, where cultural production was positioned as an instrument for regional transformation. The implementation of Bodø2024 ECOC saw this ambition translated into a structured yet diverse cultural program organized around five seasonal "chapters", reflecting the Arctic's natural rhythms:

1. Here Comes the Sun celebrating the return of light, Northern community reawakening.
2. Spring Optimism focuses on youth, hope, and European solidarity.
3. Midsummer Madness with an idea of intensity, collectivity, and cultural events.
4. Autumn Storms directed reflection, discourse, political and environmental engagement.
5. Arctic Light concluded with nuance, memory, and transformation.

This program was created to reach eight strategic objectives, which aimed for to function as both guiding principles and orientation for projects implemented under the Bodø2024 ECOC program (see Table 1). Thus, forming and following these strategic objectives was important to the increased coherence across the program, aligning local, regional, and European cultural goals through the overall Bodø2024 ECOC project implementation.

Table 1. Objectives of Bodø2024 ECOC and its potential contribution*

Strategic objective	Aim	Anticipated role of Bodø2024
1. Reverse the image of Nordland	Rebrand the region as culturally vibrant	High-profile, media-visible program events and cultural projects; international artistic collaborations; educational and capacity building initiatives for local population (with specific focus on youth).
2. Widen the cultural production base	Foster regional and interdisciplinary creation	Support for local creators, residences, co-productions.
3. Engage disengaged groups	Ensure cultural access and inclusion	Outreach; participatory forms of culture; rural and community-led events.
4. Use unusual spaces	Expand the geography of culture	Performances and installations in public, natural, or non-traditional venues.
5. Create web of cultural hotspots (especially for young people)	Decentralized infrastructure, focus on youth	Youth-led hubs; school partnerships; distributed networks.
6. Internationalise cultural practice	Deepen European cultural integration	Incoming/outgoing exchanges, EU projects, mobility funding.
7. Support cultural professionals	Build sustainable careers in culture	Training, mentorship, cross-sector collaboration.
8. Promote freedom of expression	Ensure pluralistic and critical cultural content	Projects exploring social justice, indigenous voices, democratic themes.

* - Adopted from Bodø2024 Bid Book (BODØ2024, 2019)

Midsummer mystery | Photo : David Engmo



Figure 1. Bodø2024 ECOCs key strategic priorities
(Source: Bodø2024 Bid Book, 2019: 14-15)

Key priority	Anticipated impact
CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ An improved cultural education model ▶ Between 80% and 100% of school students take part ▶ Increase by 50% students returning after studying elsewhere
GROWING OUR AUDIENCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Overall audience numbers improve by 30% and by 40% from hard to reach groups
CONNECTIONS AND CAPACITY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Increase of 20% in cultural workforce ▶ Each of 10 main towns is a recognised cultural, cool hotspot
CITY DEVELOPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Bodø known as a cool European cultural city ▶ 20% increase in new workers coming to Nordland and Bodø ▶ Creative businesses increase by 100% Tourist jobs by 10% ▶ 30% increase in hotel stays up to 2024; continued post 2024 growth
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Nordland recognised as best practice example of cultural democracy

Bodø2024 ECOC formulated its objectives in accordance with the Guidelines developed by European Commission, adapted to the local context. The Guidelines developed by the European Commission outlines a hierarchy of the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) initiative (European Commission, 2018), as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. ECoC hierarchy of objectives (European Commission, 2018).

General Objectives								
Safeguard and promote the diversity of cultures in Europe, highlight the common features they share, increase citizens' sense of belonging to a common cultural space (G01), and foster the contribution of culture to the long-term development of cities (G02).								
Specific Objectives (SO)								
SO1: Enhance the range, diversity and European dimension of the cultural offering in cities, including through transnational co-operation			SO2: Widen access to and participation in culture		SO3: Strengthen the capacity of the cultural sector and its links with other sectors		SO4: Raise the international profile of cities through culture	
Operational Objectives								
Stimulate extensive cultural programs of high artistic quality	Ensure cultural programs feature a strong European dimension and transnational co-operation	Involve a wide range of citizens and stakeholders in preparing and implementing the cultural program	Create new opportunities for a wide range of citizens to attend or participate in cultural events	Improve cultural infrastructure	Develop the skills, capacity and governance of the cultural sector	Stimulate partnership and co-operation with other sectors	Promote the city and its cultural program	Improve the international outlook of residents

2.2. Bodø2024 in a nutshell (based on the Program events report).

Key figures

434
PROGRAM EVENTS

4,500
CUMULATIVE EVENT-DAYS

300,000-355,000
AUDIENCE PARTICIPATIONS

12,300
PERFORMER
ENGAGEMENTS

OVER 700
PARTNERSHIPS FORMED
ACROSS CULTURAL,
EDUCATIONAL, AND
BUSINESS SECTORS

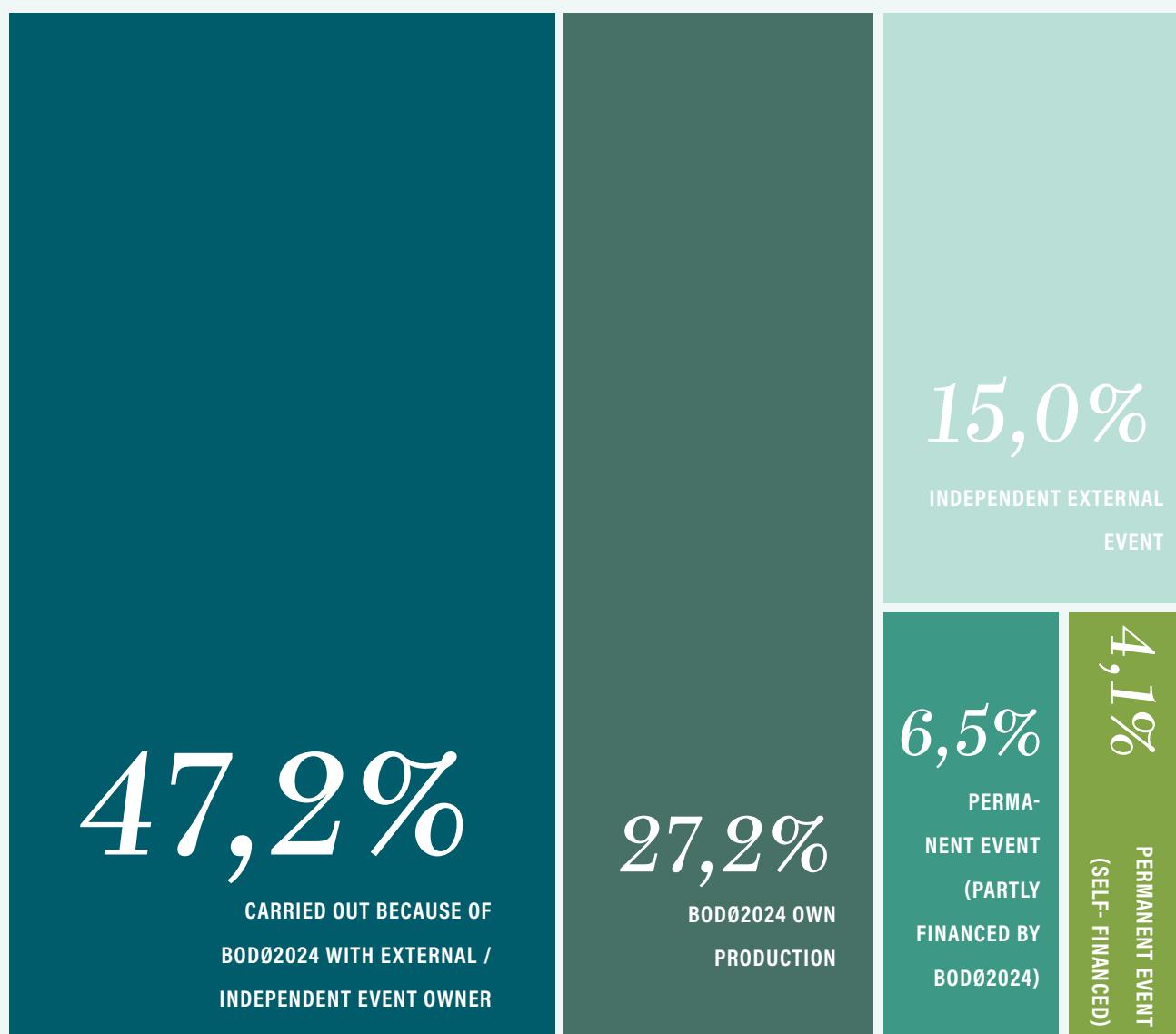
OVER 4,500
VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENTS

114
CULTURAL
PROJECTS



Program events and cultural projects

Total number of program events/event days and its categories



Number of events by month



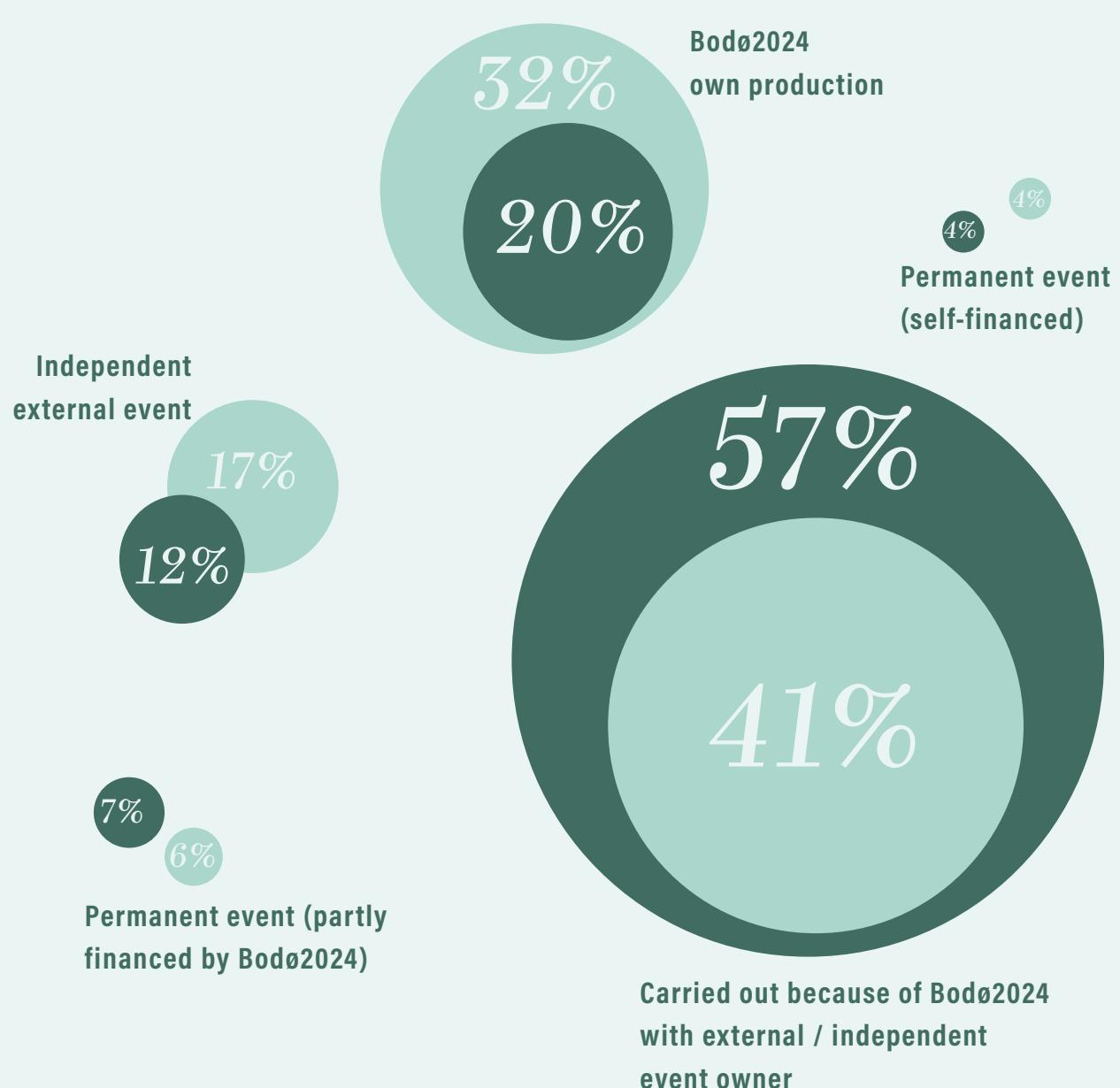
Regional spread of events



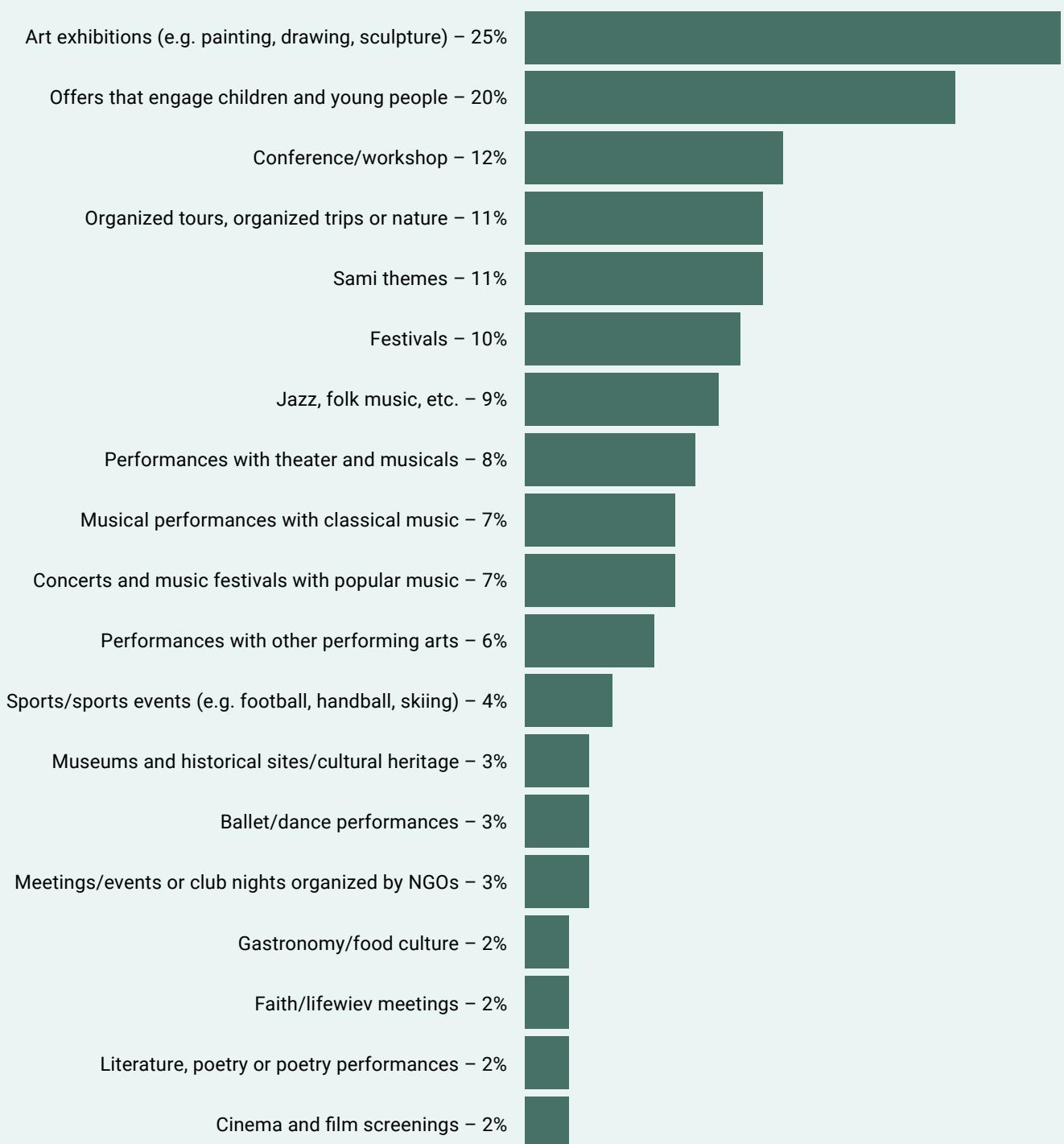
Categories for the program events carried out in Bodø



Categories for the program events carried out in the rest of Nordland



Program's genre breadth, by proportion of events



Audience engagement and capacity building

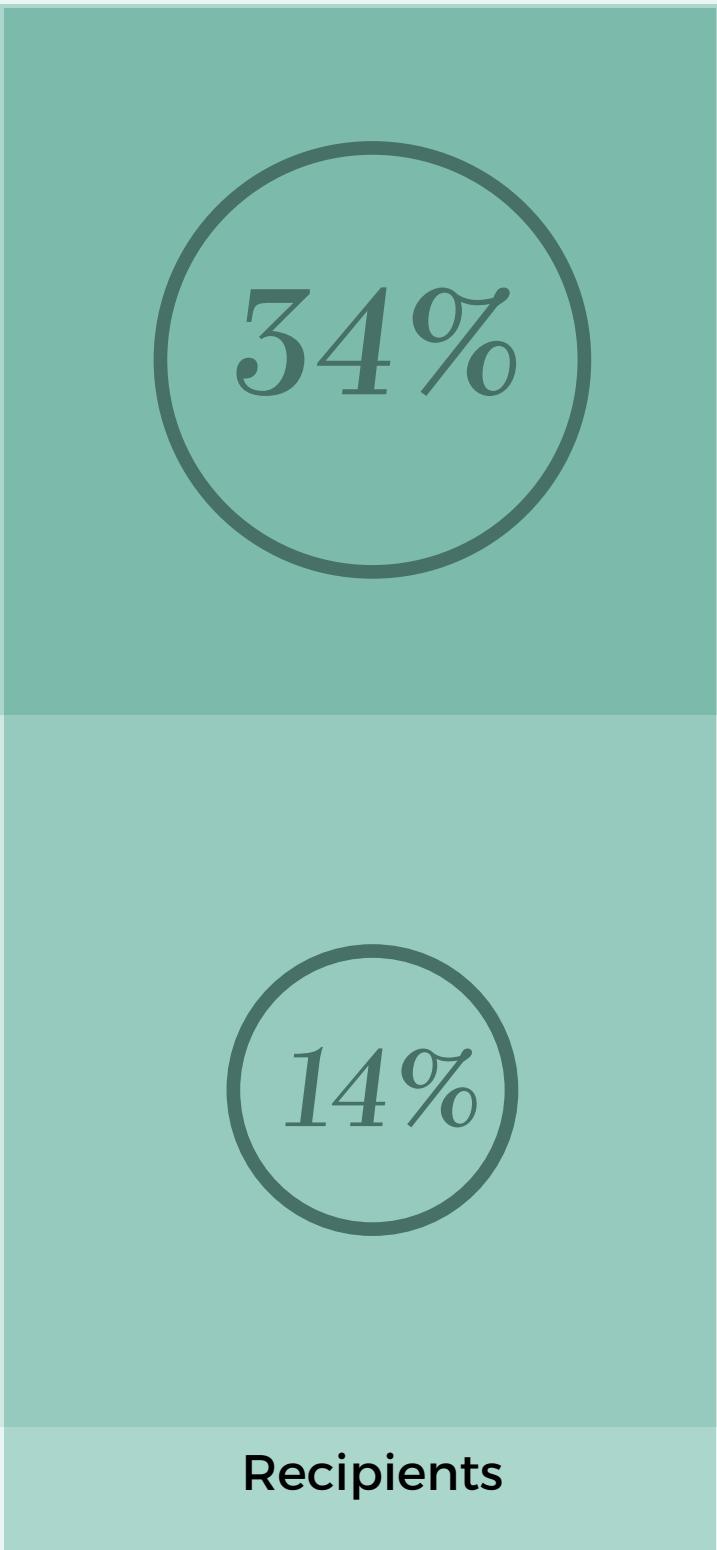
Cultural professionals



Mixed (professionals +
Amateurs)



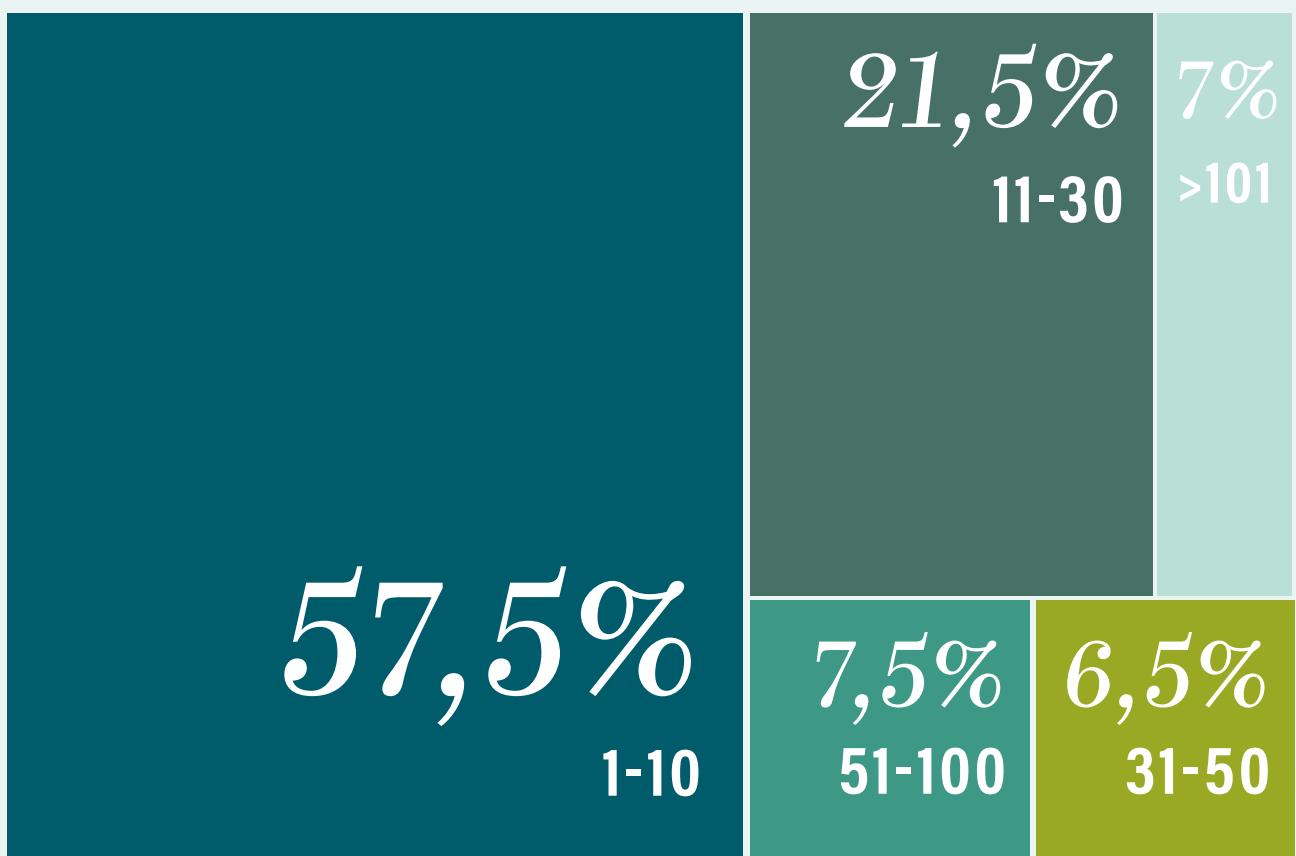
Engaged



Engaged audience' refers to participants who actively took part in the programme activities, while 'audience as recipients' refers to those who primarily experienced the events as observers.

Performers

Proportion of events by number of performers participated



Professional background of the performers

CONDUCTORS, COMPOSERS,
MUSICIANS AND SINGERS -

56,5%

CHOREOGRAPHERS AND DANCERS -
22,9%

ACTORS - **15,4%**



TRANSLATORS, INTERPRETERS,
ETC. -

9,3%

TELEVISION AND RADIO
PRESENTERS -

4,7%

AUTHORS, ETC. -
15,0%



PHOTOGRAPHERS AND
CINEMATOGRAPHERS -

30,8%

SCULPTORS, PAINTERS AND OTHER
VISUAL ARTISTS -

25,2%

INTERIOR DESIGNERS AND
DECORATORS -

3,3%



SPORT-RELATED PERFORMERS -

20,6%

TECHNICAL CONSERVATORS -
1,9%

DIRECTORS - **12,1%**

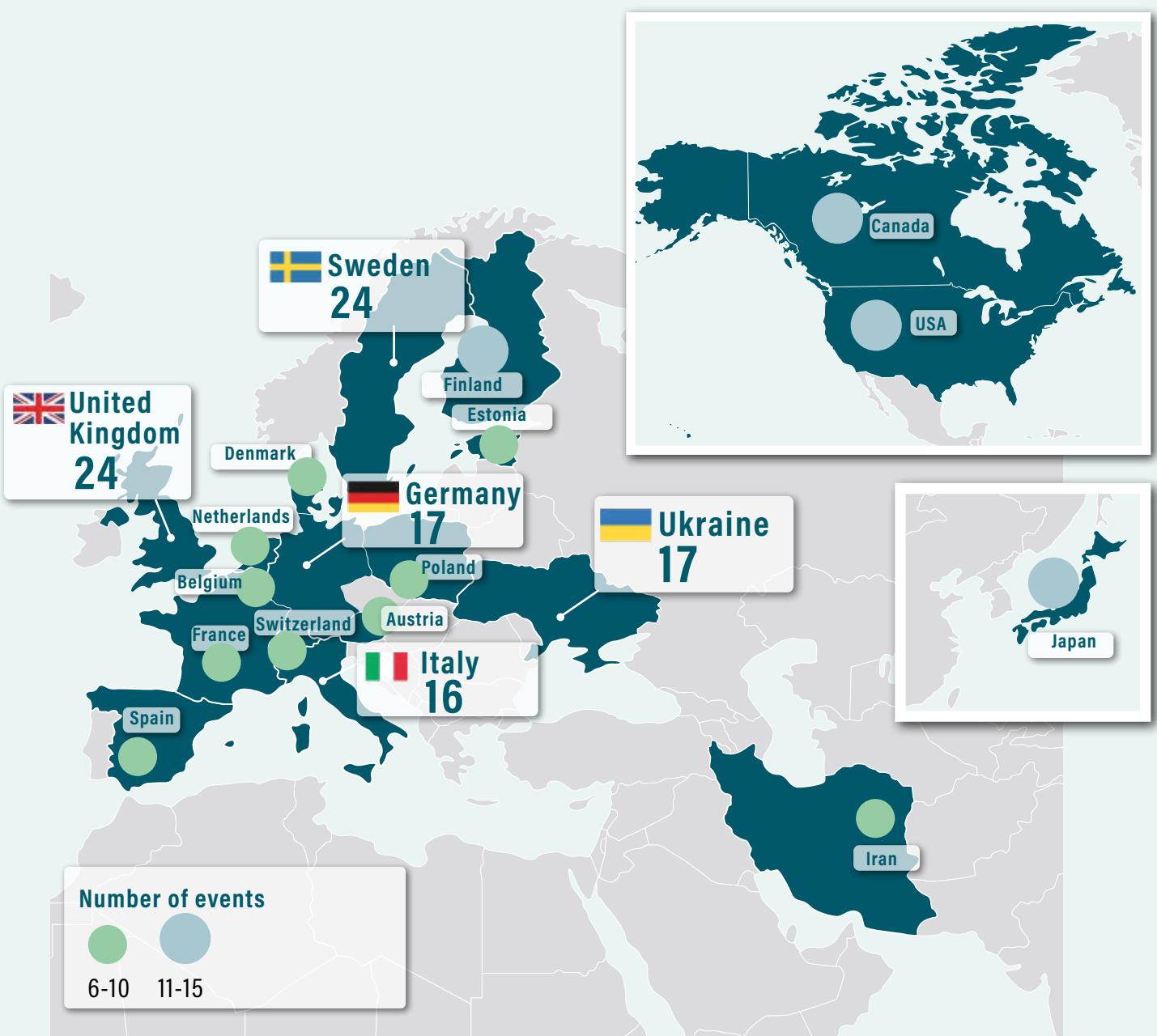
OTHER PERFORMING ARTISTS -
30,0%

CURATORS - **12,6%**



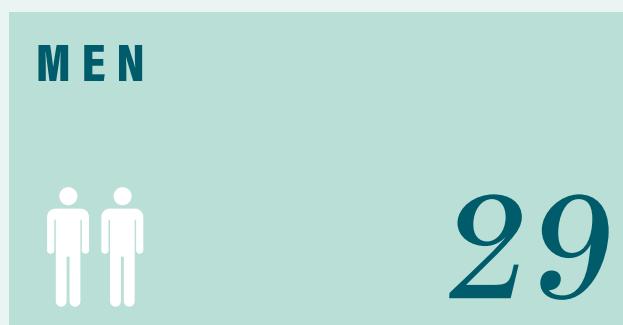
International dimension of the program

Number of program events with performers from outside Norway (more than 5)



Attendees/audience

Distribution of events for a specific target group by number of events



A large part of events for young people was carried out under the UNG2024 project, which main goal was to engage young people in planning, preparation and implementation of their own ideas.



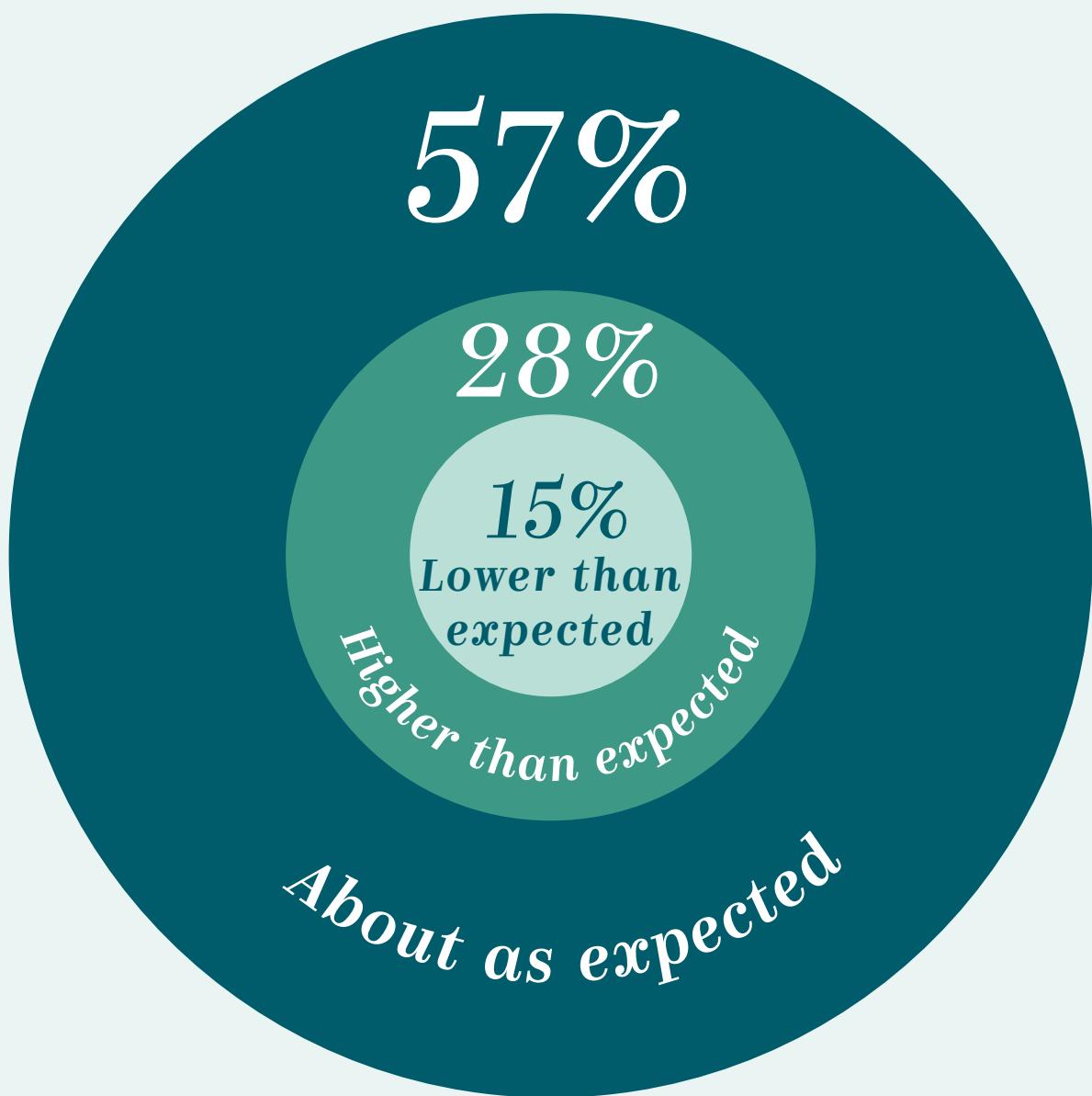
Youth2024 – A Fresh Start | Photo : BYRAA

Proportion of events by audience number in Bodø and Nordland



“Was the audience number as expected?”

- based on survey of the program event organizers.

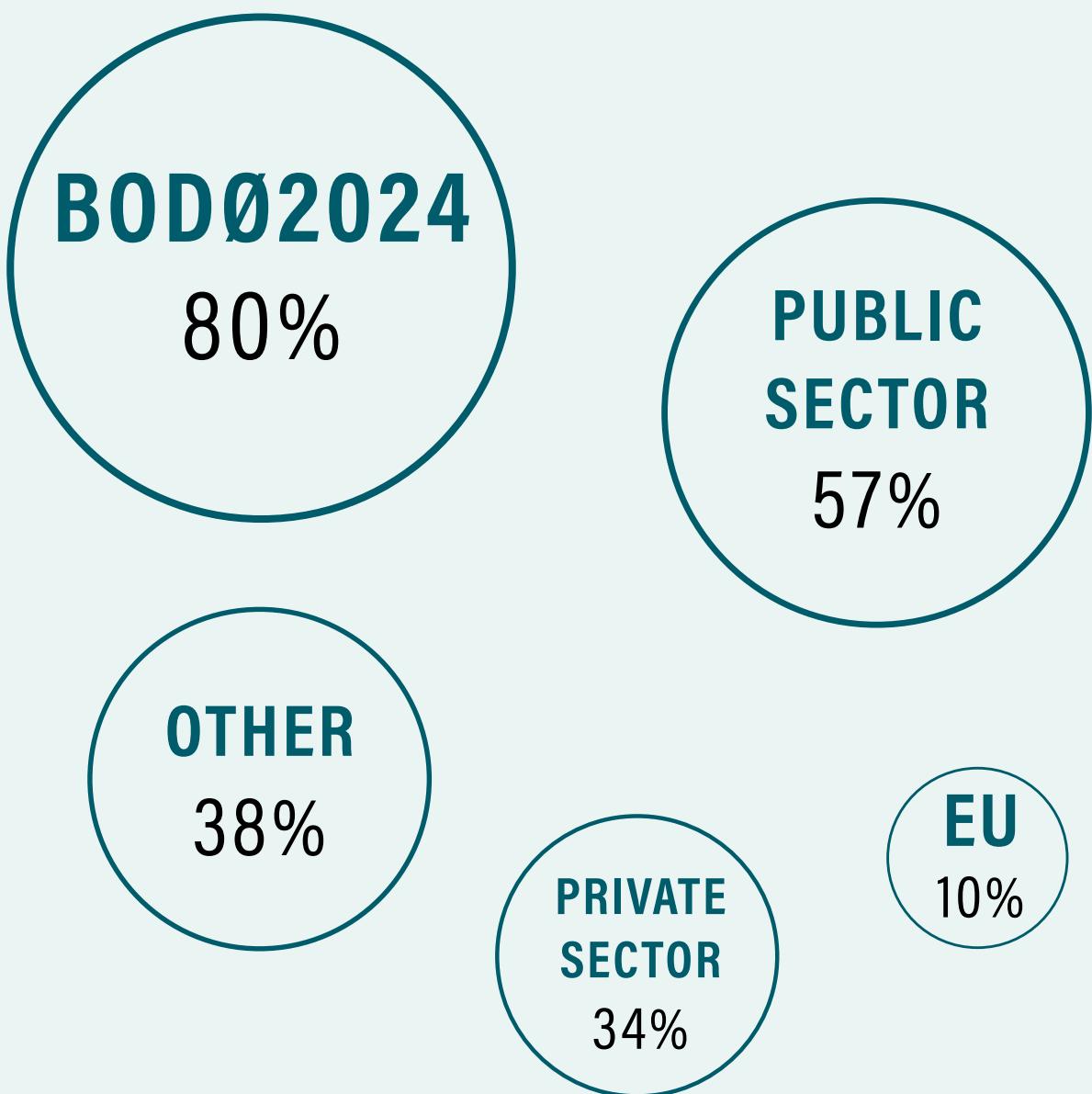


Funding and collaboration

Table 3. Key financial statistic for Bodø and the rest of Nordland

	BODØ	NORDLAND
MONEY SPENT BY BODØ2024, IN NOK	103,101,942 76%	31,953,210 24%
TOTAL BUDGET, IN NOK	229,158,163 69%	101,785,687 31%
MULTIPLIER EFFECT	2.22	3.19
CUMULATIVE EVENT-DAYS	2,534	1,961
TOTAL MINIMUM PARTICIPATIONS	221,876 73%	82,016 27%
AVERAGE COST OF AN EVENT FOR BODØ2024, IN NOK	383,279	193,656
AVERAGE COST OF AN EVENT PR PARTICIPATION FOR BODØ2024, IN NOK	465	390

*Financial sources used by program
event organizers*



3 . M O N I - T O R 2 0 2 4 M E T H O D - O L O G Y

The evaluation team has been working since August 2021 to develop the conceptual model for the evaluation described in the inception report. Our approach has been to use systematic methods to assess how short-term sociocultural impacts of ECOC status, both tangible and intangible, can be measured. As data appears, follow-up studies are necessary to measure long-term effects.

This approach to evaluation and monitoring is both explorative, descriptive, and explanatory. The evaluation part is based on the assessment of how well Bodø2024 ECOC has achieved its own goals presented in the bid book as well as the EC's descriptive framework mapping changes in the ECOC's objectives laid out in that framework (European Commission, 2018). The explanatory part of the evaluation, on the other hand, is based on several theoretical models that enabled us to test some hypotheses regarding the existence of relationships for how cultural megaevents such as the Bodø 2024 ECOC can influence urban and regional development. Especially, we were focusing on understanding how culture and cultural mega events such as Bodø2024 ECOC can influence peoples' intentions to stay in or move out of the region. The explorative element relates to the learning and insights derived from monitoring effort. We proposed new or improved theoretical explanations giving room for policy implications that might provide improved gains for future ECOC's cities aiming for art and culture as means for societal development.

Our model for evaluating the effects of the title year for Bodø was inspired by the concept of social auditing (Humble, 1973; Owen et al., 2000). This form of auditing has proved to be useful in measuring the effectiveness of activities, programs, and projects from the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and assessing their long-term objectives and impact on the public welfare and society generally (Owen et al., 2000). Social auditing is not a novel practice (Humble, 1973). The approach came into wide use through the circulation of participatory governance tools built on stakeholder engagement and designed to define and reflect stakeholders' interests regarding the outputs, outcomes, and impacts of initiatives and thus manifests the principles of openness and democracy (Humphrey and Owen, 2000). For these reasons, we have used social auditing as an approach for developing, measuring,

assessing, and reporting the impact of the Bodø2024 IKS project activities on society. In social auditing, the "audit" part plays the dominant role in determining how the evaluation process is conducted, as in performance auditing. The "social" part adds a unique perspective to the auditing procedure by focusing on why and for whom the audit is being conducted and involving the stakeholders or beneficiaries directly at multiple stages of the audit, thereby enhancing dialogue and engagement. All the stakeholders are considered as active change agents in evaluating the social impact of the projects undertaken as part of Bodø2024 ECOC so as to assure its relevance to beneficiaries in accountable and transparent ways.

Social auditing, especially in the context of major societal transformations, relies on the articulation and use of Theory of Change (ToC). ToC is a conceptual framework represented as causal links among multileveled outcomes designed to explain how and why an initiative can bring about a desired change (Clark, 2019; Clark and Grimaldi, 2013). To develop an initial explanatory evaluation model for Bodø2024 ECOC, we translated the core strategic objectives into evaluation objectives guided by ToC (Figure 1). This theory thus played a crucial role in our social auditing system approach through the construction of "input-activity-outcome-impact" links and enabling the assessment of multi-level objectives.

Bodø submitted its application for ECOC status in 2019. The preparation of the application was coordinated and involved many stakeholders who contributed to its various features. Following the invitation by Bodø2024 IKS to join the evaluation and monitoring task and to present MONITOR2024's plan for the evaluation, the research team made its own translation of ToC and discussed certain aspects of the plan with the Bodø2024 IKS management team. We arrived at the following visualization of the change theory (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. ToC for Bodø2024 ECOC (Modified from Inception report).



PURPOSE:

Affordable, Accessible, Attractive,
Activating culture

**FUTURE (DESIRED)
SITUATION**

- Youth staying in region
- Capacities of youth

- Number of audiences
- Participation of less engaged groups

- Cultural workforce
- Networking
- Connections

- City recognition
- Attractiveness for cultural workers
- Creative business
- Tourism

- Cultural democracy
- Awareness and diversity

- Nordland and Bodø recognised as an open, developed region.
- More attractive place to live, work and return to for young people.
- Sustained audience and visitor growth beyond 2024.
- Stronger, more connected cultural ecosystem across the region.
- Culture integrated in city/ regional development.

The Figure 2 visualizes a causal pathway linking identified structural constraints in Nordland and Bodø to a set of cultural-development outcomes expected from Bodø2024 ECOC. When developing our contextual interpretation of the ToC, we identified six interrelated deficits (so-called “present (undesired) situation”): (i) limited international visibility of the region, (ii) uneven territorial distribution of cultural offers and audiences, (iii) challenges in retaining and attracting young people and skilled labour, (iv) the need to expand international visibility in parallel with sustainable tourism, (v) heterogeneous organisational capacity and international connectedness among cultural actors, and (vi) an only partially diversified practice of cultural democracy and freedom of expression. These are treated as systemic conditions that limit the region’s cultural, social and economic attractiveness.

The inputs (financial resources, Bodø2024 IKS staff, social and physical infrastructures, partnerships both national and international) enable Bodø2024 ECOC to produce a set of outputs. These outputs are not random cultural happenings but are rather planned and organised within five priority areas of the ECOC year: (1) children and young people, (2) city/place development, (3) audience growth, (4) freedom of expression and inclusion, and (5) connections and capacity. Within each priority area, activities generate concrete results such as new or redistributed cultural offerings, audience-development initiatives, platforms for democratic and minority voices, and professional/networking opportunities for cultural actors.

ToC predicts that if these outputs are delivered at sufficient scale and territorial reach, they will produce higher-order outcomes observable at the Nordland and Bodø level: (a) recognition of the region as open and developed, (b) increased residential and return attractiveness for young people, (c) sustained audience and visitor growth after 2024, (d) a stronger and interconnected regional cultural ecosystem, and (e) the incorporation of culture into city and regional development policies. The end goal is that people should want to live their lives in Bodø and Nordland County. In effect, the figure conceptualises Bodø2024 ECOC as an intervention that converts temporary cultural investment into durable place-based development gains through the sequences from inputs to outputs → outcomes.

ToC was needed at the start of the design of a holistic evaluation system² to enable the assessment and measurement of particularly significant outputs, outcomes, and impacts of the title year project. Table 3 summarizes how effects of Bodø2024 ECOC on different stakeholders were captured by using different sources and scientific methods designed and executed by MONITOR2024 research team.

² By holistic system it is meant that the evaluation has covered multiple areas of impact and not focused only on the economic, social or cultural angles alone. MONITOR2024 has focused on looking at wide range of potential theme by using varied methods.



Giellavahkku 2022 | Photo : BYRAA

Table 3. Overview of stakeholders and scientific methods used for the evaluation

Social audit object/ Stakeholder	Focus of evaluation	Method/data collection used	Analytical tools used	References to MONITOR2024 reports series (see Appendix)
Artists/cultural professionals/organizers	Perceptions of Bodø2024; program events and cultural projects; intentions to stay/move	Surveys/Statistics/ Interviews/External databases	Descriptive statistics/ qualitative data analysis	Artists report Baseline report Updated baseline report
Bodø2024 IKS	Activities, funding, geography of the program events; cultural projects; etc.	Interviews/Data insourcing/ Survey/Data from Telia	Descriptive statistics/ qualitative data coding	Program events report Projects report
Cultural institutions/ cultural system	Bodø2024 effects on cultural institutions	Surveys/Statistics	Descriptive statistics	Baseline report Updated baseline report Artists report
Local businesses, including employees in creative industries	Direct and indirect economic effects of Bodø2024	Surveys ³ /Statistics	Descriptive statistics	Baseline report Updated baseline report
Local citizens (including the audience of Bodø2024 events)	Trends of cultural consumption; perceptions of Bodø2024; intentions to stay/move	Surveys People's Jury/ Surveys of population/ Netnography	Descriptive statistics/ Cluster analysis/ Qualitative data coding / AI-assisted analysis	Peoples Jury report Social media report

³ The survey submitted via Norwegian Confederation of Enterprises (NHO) has given no results. The survey focused on mapping how Bodø2024 was perceived to affect businesses in Bodø and other cities in Nordland. However, after several reminders MONITOR2024 could not get satisfactory number of answers to justify that analysis.

Municipalities/local governments (Bodø, rest of Nordland)	Perceptions of Bodø2024 results; legacy; strategies	Economic simulations based on a digital twin of Bodø; document analysis; meetings	Agent-Based Modelling	Scenario report Updated scenario report
Norwegian/ international mass media	Perceptions of Bodø2024	Document analysis	AI-assisted analysis	Press media report
University students	Trends of cultural consumption; perceptions of Bodø2024; intentions to stay/move	Surveys	Descriptive statistics	Students report
Volunteers	Trends of cultural consumption; perceptions of Bodø2024; intentions to stay/move	Surveys/Interviews	Descriptive statistics/ qualitative data coding	Volunteers report
Upper secondary school students	Trends of cultural consumption; perceptions of Bodø2024; intentions to stay/move	Surveys/Interviews	Descriptive statistics/ qualitative data coding	Adolescence report

As shown in Table 3, the MONITOR2024 research group employed traditional data collection methods such as surveys, interviews, analysis of document, and analysis of statistical data from external databases. However, several innovative data collection and analysis methods were also used, including netnography, People's Jury, telecommunication data from Telia, AI-assisted analysis

of press media, and Agent-Based Modeling (ABM) of Bodø municipality for socio-economic simulations (a "digital twin" developed by the local company LOS Analytics). This provides interesting database for follow-up studies to assess the long-term impacts that Bodø2024.





Querini Pre-Premiere at Stormen Concert Hall | Photo : Vidar Thorbjørnsen

4 .

B 0 D Ø 2 0 2 4

E C 0 C K E Y

S T R A T E G I C

A R E A S O F

I M P A C T

Section 4 presents the key assessments of Bodø2024 ECOC's achievements in relation to the five main strategic priority areas indicated in the Bid Book (Bodø2024, 2019).

THESE THEMES ARE:

- “Children and Young People”
- “Growing Our Audience”
- “Connections and Capacity”
- “City Development”
- “Freedom of Expression”

ALL SECTIONS ARE ORGANIZED INTO THREE SUB-SECTIONS:

- 1) Bodø2024 ECOC's goals, ambitions, and anticipated impacts within each theme.
- 2) Monitor 2024's assessment of Bodø2024 ECOC's activities, outputs, and outcomes, highlighting achievements and challenges experienced.
- 3) Potential impacts and implications.

4.1 Strategic Priority: “Children and young people”

4.1.1 Bodø2024 ambitions

– Empower the youth with culture!

One of the key ambitions of Bodø2024 was to place children and young people at the heart of cultural life in Bodø and Nordland. The initiative aimed to empower young people as co-creators, organizers, and future cultural leaders, ensuring both autonomy and guidance throughout the process with support from Bodø2024.

The initiative sought to deliver three main outcomes (Bodø2024, 2019):

1. Increased youth participation in cultural activities and decision-making, fostering self-expression through diverse cultural forms such as music, dance, visual arts, social media, and storytelling.
2. Enhanced skills, confidence, and competences among young people through cultural education and capacity building. This included raising awareness of European and local culture and values among youth in Nordland.
3. Reduced rural youth outmigration by improving cultural engagement and making the region more attractive for young people to live in or return.

Bodø2024 anticipated impacts Key area “Children and young people”

- 80–100% of school students participating in cultural education activities
- 50% increase in students returning to Nordland after studying elsewhere
- Bodø and Nordland recognized as a cool, youth-friendly cultural region
- Long-term legacy of youth-led cultural infrastructure and networks
- Contribution to reversing the rural exodus and demographic challenges
- Establishment of Bodø as a model for youth involvement in European cultural development



Midsummer 22 june 2024 | Photo: Airida Bekeryte



UNG Opening – Marstein (2024) | Photo: Bjørn Nikolas Rognså

4.1.2 MONITOR2024 assessment

MAJOR BASELINE

Between 2000 to 2021, Northern Norway experienced a negative population trend, with a decline of approximately 16% in the number of young people (aged 0–18) (Baseline report: 10). This represents a significant challenge for local authorities in maintaining a resilient population level necessary for sustaining economic activity. The assumption behind Bodø2024 ECOC has been that engagement in art and culture could serve as a means for changing this negative population trend (Nordland County Council, 2025). The long-term societal impact of Bodø2024 ECOC was envisioned in terms of greater offer of cultural events and cultural engagement fostering stronger social interactions, a deeper sense of belonging, and ultimately, a stronger desire to remain in or move to Bodø and Nordland for all population groups, but especially for young people.

Prior to the title year, the pattern for attending cultural events demonstrates generational differences in cultural preferences: while older groups of population prefer and attend theatre and classical music, youth

are more inclined toward cinema, sports, and festivals (Baseline report: 76). It means that Bodø2024 ECOC had a task to address this generational diversity in cultural preferences.

In terms of cultural education, 13% of school-aged children are enrolled in culture-related educational programs at the school level, but this number declined in 2023 (Baseline report: 33). According to SSB (2024), the decline continued in 2024. At the university level, around 8% of applicants in Nordland are attracted to culture-related programs, but this figure is also decreasing annually, including 2024 (Baseline report: 30; HKDIR 2023).

Regarding participation and the perceived importance of culture among young people (aged 16–25), this group reports the lowest satisfaction with cultural offerings in their municipalities and the highest willingness to move away within three years (Baseline report: 100–101). This suggests that the current cultural offers are important for the young to thrive, but they do not fulfill their needs and wishes completely.

BODØ2024 MAJOR ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

During the title year, Bodø2024 ECOC had numerous program events tailored for children and youth. Of the 434 registered program events, 20% were specifically designed for children and young people (Program events report). These events included concerts, theatre performances, movie nights, LEGO robotics, museum visits, sports, and nature-based experiences. Notably, 52% of all events surveyed encouraged active audience participation, particularly among youth. On average, youth and young adults attended approximately 1.7 events, with many citing novelties and learning as key motivations (Peoples' jury report). Furthermore, 85% of event organizers report expected or higher than expected audience numbers (Program events report).

A distinctive part of Bodø2024 was the UNG2024 project, which empowered youth to plan and implement their own cultural initiatives. UNG2024 emphasized co-creation and co-production, establishing new arenas for engagement in a wide range of activities from competence-building workshops to festivals. The support in networking and capacity building activities was provided by the UNG2024 coordinating team. In 2024, 210 open call applications from young people were evaluated, resulting in NOK 4 million being distributed across 77 projects. A total of 300 youth representatives were actively engaged in program events, which reached over 10,000 young people (Projects report).

Another important aspect of Bodø2024 was the mobilization of youth as cultural volunteers, who preferred to be called the "young crew," highlighting their role as active, visible, and necessary contributors (Volunteers report). These young participants were recruited mainly through schools, personal networks, and self-initiative. They contributed to various

capacities, including arena hosting, logistics, catering, decoration, artist hospitality, and media-related tasks. The young crew demonstrated a high level of engagement, contributing with an average of 17.9 hours per person, particularly in creative and technical roles (Volunteers report). It is not uncommon that the volunteers acted as 'ambassadors' for the whole ECOC-project, as communicators in their families, friend circles and other environments.

These activities resulted in increased engagement on social media (with over 5,000 followers) and frequent positive mentions of youth involvement in local media, emphasizing youth empowerment and improved access to culture (Press media report: 26;29).

Some examples of Bodø2024 program events directed towards youth

- **My Life Is Somewhere Else** – exploring youth migration and belonging.
- **Children's International Day** – multicultural celebration across Nordland.
- **Eurogym 2024** – non-competitive youth sports and cultural exchange.
- **My European Story** – storytelling and cultural exchange with twin cities.
- **Kaleidoscope** – inclusive performance project with youth from diverse backgrounds.

OUTCOMES

ACHIEVEMENTS

At the individual level, our data indicates that Bodø2024's youth-oriented programs had several positive effects, including strong motivation for capacity-building, strengthened CVs, improved confidence, and strengthened social connections, even though for many participants, it was their first time in such activities and volunteering (Projects report). Young people reported feeling recognized, useful, valued, and part of something they found to be meaningful. Surveys show a high level of satisfaction with their engagement (scores up to 6.7 out of 7) and a strong willingness to volunteer again in the future (Volunteers report).

Regarding youth engagement as artists, young participants showed higher involvement in Bodø2024 activities compared to more mature and established artists. Young artists also expressed a stronger need for access to professional networks (Artists report), suggesting that such networks can foster collaboration and learning opportunities for emerging cultural practitioners. Furthermore, several youth initiatives were driven by individual engagement. Without continued resources, youth-led initiatives and youth networks risk losing momentum, especially in those Nordland municipalities facing cultural budget cuts.

CHALLENGES

Despite the high level of engagement and dedication to cultural activities, the impact of Bodø2024 on young people's decisions to stay in or move out of the region remains unclear. While cultural engagement strongly

correlates with a sense of belonging to the city or region, it does not outweigh more pressing concerns such as employment and housing (Adolescence report).

Another important point is that culture cannot be separated from other municipal processes, especially those affecting young adults. In 2024 the municipality entered a severe financial crisis that called for extensive reductions in public services (Bodø municipality, 2024). The proposed measures included the closure of Furumoen sykehjem, the removal of short-term nursing-home places, substantial cuts to culture and sports subsidies, reduced allocations for equipment and teaching materials, cuts within the child and family sector, lower staffing levels in primary schools, and reduced operations for roads and municipal buildings. A restructuring plan also proposed the closure of Østbyen and Alstad primary schools and the Bjerkenga and Gjærån kindergartens, although the governing coalition later concluded that the projected savings were too limited to justify these closures. While public discourse in 2024 positioned young people as key cultural stakeholders, the simultaneous threat of school and kindergarten cuts, widely criticised in social media (Social media report), intensified concerns about whether municipal priorities aligned with the needs of children and young adults (Press media report). This broader context offers a plausible explanation for the drop in survey scores assessing Bodø2024 as a "good investment," which declined from 4.74 to 4.29 during 2024 (Peoples' jury report). Young adults also cited lack of interest, limited time, family obligations, and insufficient communication as additional reasons for lower engagement.



UNG Opening 2024 - Marstein | Photo: Kasper Holgersen

UNG Opening – Marstein

Photo :Kasper Holgersen



UNG Opening – Victoria Nadine

Photo: Bjørn Nikolas Rognså

4.1.3 Potential impacts and implications

As of fall 2025, it remains difficult to fully assess the materialized and potential impacts of Bodø2024 ECoC within Strategic Key Area: "Children and Young People." However, several significant implications can be highlighted.

Naturally, as of fall 2025 it remains difficult to fully assess the materialized and potential long-term impacts of Bodø2024 ECoC within Strategic Key Area "Children and Young People." However, several significant implications can be highlighted.

Increased youth inclusion and cultural participation have the potential to reduce outmigration by making Bodø and other parts of Nordland more attractive to young people. Culture can serve as an important complementary driver for retention, provided it is combined with structural factors such as employment and housing. Policymakers can draw lessons from Bodø2024's youth engagement to lay the groundwork for long-term cultural involvement, which can be integrated into municipal youth policy. For culture to fulfill such a role, it must respond to the needs of young people entering adulthood.

To support that, our scenario analysis of Bodø2024's potential impact on municipal development suggests that a successful legacy could lead to long-term population growth – an estimated increase of more than 2,000 residents in Bodø by 2036 compared to 2023, particularly among families and youth (Scenario report). Conversely, in a "worst-case scenario" where the legacy is lost, youth outmigration and stagnation in school enrollment are likely to continue (Scenario report). This underscores the need for continuous innovation and family-friendly cultural formats to sustain the engagement of youth and young adults (Peoples' jury report). In addition, it is very important to recognize

the time perspective for observing the actual impacts of such initiatives. As one of the project leaders of a youth focused initiative mentioned (Projects report):

"From a political or economic perspective, it is difficult because people often think in numbers and concrete results. Culture and youth work are difficult to quantify. You cannot always show the value now – maybe only in 10 years, when someone moves back, starts a family, or becomes part of the local community. It requires people who are willing to stick with it. [...] It is more about capacity and perseverance than large budgets."

This development also depends on future cultural policies being aligned with broader city and regional development strategies. Cultural opportunities for young people must not be undermined by neglect in basic social infrastructure, such as schools. Such inconsistencies could have long-term implications for trust in cultural policy and youth retention.

There is a significant risk that the legacy and sustainability of Bodø2024's results could be threatened by future municipal budget cuts as well as lack of staff and capacities. As one leader of youth project noticed (Projects report):

“Culture is important – in both boom-and-bust times. Youth are the future, and that often means a little more money in the wallet. Supporting an event for youth is easier to sell than something for adults. I have yet to get a single politician to say no when I ask to host something in their municipality. The only thing we lack is more time, more employees and more resources.”

It is also important to note that a potential mismatch between the younger generation's focus on a socialization-oriented culture (such as going to the gym, spending time in nature) and the older generation's preference for classical arts may be reflected in municipal strategic priorities and funding allocations. Policymakers should better understand and strengthen the development of youth cultural infrastructure, enhancing both employability and cultural competencies (Projects report). The experience of Bodø2024 clearly demonstrates how its legacy can help make cultural careers more attractive and contribute to the long-term recruitment of young artists.





Eurogym parade 2024 | Photo: David Engmo



International Party at Glasshuset 2023 | Photo: Arina Karbovskaya

4.2 Strategic Priority: “Growing Our Audience”

4.2.1 Bodø2024 ambitions – expand cultural participation!

Another key ambition of Bodø2024 ECOC was to expand cultural participation across all demographic groups, with a particular focus on engaging those currently underrepresented in cultural activities, such as immigrants, seniors, people with disabilities, and individuals experiencing isolation.

The aim was to shift audiences from passive spectatorship to active involvement in cultural creation and co-curation. In this context, community engagement and cultural democracy were to be strengthened through inclusive program development, including the creation of

new venues and spaces located where people live, and involving communities directly in delivering activities. Audience growth was expected to follow as a result of making culture more attractive, accessible, affordable, and activating—the four A's (Bodø2024, 2019).



International Party at Glasshuset 2023 | Photo: Arina Karbovskaya

The initiative aimed to achieve several outcomes (Bodø2024, 2019):

1. Citizens should develop a stronger sense of ownership and belonging in cultural life.
2. Cultural events should be co-curated with diverse communities.
3. Participation should increase among hard-to-reach groups, including immigrants, seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income families.
4. More volunteers from diverse backgrounds should contribute to cultural events.
5. Physical and digital accessibility to cultural venues and activities should be improved.

Bodø2024 anticipated impacts
Key area “Growing Our Audience”

- 30% overall increase in audience numbers
- 40% increase in participation from hard-to-reach groups
- Nordland recognized as a best-practice example of cultural democracy
- Libraries transformed into community cultural centers
- Long-term cultural habits established, reducing isolation and fostering inclusion

4.2.2 MONITOR2024 assessment

MAJOR BASELINE

As a baseline, the population in Nordland demonstrates a generally high level of cultural participation, with approximately 75% engaging in some form of cultural activity annually (Baseline report). Libraries, museums, concerts, and cinemas are among the most attended offerings in general (Baseline report). In this context, libraries, particularly Stormen Library in Bodø, function as cultural hubs. They are the most frequently visited cultural institutions, serving as venues for events, discussions, and community engagement. Festivals also play a significant role in boosting cultural attendance and regional engagement. Events such as Parkenfestivalen in Bodø and Blåfrost in the town of Rognan (Saltdal) notably increase local activity and attract visitors from across Nordland and other parts of Norway (Baseline report).

As reported in 4.1, there are clear age-based differences in cultural engagement and preferences. Younger generations tend to favor cinemas, festivals, and sports events, while older adults (60+) are more engaged in traditional cultural activities such as theatre and classical music. Geographical disparities within the region also exist. Cultural engagement is highest in Bodø, where attendance is more frequent and offerings are broader. In contrast, smaller municipalities in Nordland show lower participation, which can be attributed to limited cultural infrastructure (Baseline report, Artists report, Peoples' jury report). Similarly, media coverage reflected the disparities, depicting Bodø as a center of citizen-centered and everyday cultural activity, while the remaining part of the region as occasional and more oriented towards community, family, and nature-based engagement (Press media report).

Prior to Bodø2024 title year, community cultural engagement was also assessed through the use of digital infrastructure. While the number of local media articles on culture-related topics declined between 2019 and 2023, social media engagement with cultural content increased, particularly around Bodø2024 ECOC as a discussion topic. At the same time, Google Trends analysis revealed that culture-related search terms were not among the top 25 in Nordland during this time, indicating low search interest with cultural topics and that Google is not a major channel for discovering cultural activities in the region (Baseline report). Given the strong role of local networks in Northern Norwegian municipalities, this may suggest that cultural participation in the region is organized more through community-driven and habitual channels, than through open web searches and other digital platforms.

BODØ2024 MAJOR ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

Bodø2024 ECOC dramatically expanded audience engagement during the title year. In total, Bodø2024 ECOC was associated with 434 program events (amounting to around 4,500 cumulative event-days) in its cultural calendar. Estimated audience participations⁴ ranged between 300,000 and 355,000 (Program events report), indicating a high level of engagement. This is further supported by data from the People's Jury, which shows average individual attendance ranging from 0.5 to 3.2 events per person, depending on personal profile (Peoples' jury report). While several events attracted more than 5,000 participants, 73% of program events had up to 500 attendees (Program events report). The Bodø2024 ECOC program offered a diverse range of genres, with the most common being: 1) art exhibitions (25%); 2) children and youth activities (20%), 3) music

⁴The term participations that is mentioned here and is used throughout the report means that one person could have participated in several events.



Opening ceremony 2024 | Photo Fredrik Stenbro

(23%) and 4) festivals (10%). Importantly, Bodø2024 succeeded in engaging audiences in cultural co-production, with 52% of events involving active audience participation (e.g., walking tours, workshops, festivals). Additionally, 41% of events were led by mixed groups of professionals and amateurs, fostering inclusive cultural creation and capacity building.

Although Bodø was the central hub for the title year, Bodø2024 IKS implemented a decentralized programming strategy, with 38% of events organized outside Bodø. This led to increased cultural activity not only in Bodø but across all of Nordland. For example, five events in Vågan (a municipality in the Lofoten archipelago consisting of 9,793 inhabitants) attracted more than 14,000 participations.

Diversity was also reflected in the audience focus with 43% of events targeted specific groups where youth (within ages of 13–20) represented the largest category. 25% of events focused on minority groups, including immigrants, indigenous communities, and people with disabilities. 82% of events were accessible to people with disabilities. However, only 10% of events were available remotely via digital platforms, indicating room for improvement in digital inclusion (Program events report).

Bodø2024 IKS also mobilized over 4,500 volunteer participations. Surveys show that volunteers are eager to attend more art and culture events than they currently do. Their top interests include concerts, libraries, sports, and cinema (Volunteers report).

OUTCOMES

ACHIEVEMENTS

Given the high level of engagement, to what extent has Bodø2024 ECOC changed cultural consumption and

Examples of Bodø2024 large scale program events linked to growing the audience (number of participations)

- **Exhibition "Stories from Cold War" 40,000**
- **Opening Ceremony 20,000**
- **Marcialonga Arctic Ski Race 13,000**
- **International Children Day 13,000**
- **Eurogym 5,000**
- **Midsummer Mystery 4,500**

engaged those who were previously uninvolved? During the title year Bodø2024 ECOC has contributed to broadening cultural participation across Nordland, increasing the visibility of Bodø and the region as a cultural destination (Press media report). Surveys of program events show that 85% of events met or exceeded expected audience numbers, indicating successful audience mobilization (Program events report).

Data from the Peoples' Jury indicates that cultural preferences have slightly shifted from 2023 to 2025, which can be attributed to the impact of Bodø2024 ECOC (Peoples' jury report). Jurors expressed a stronger desire to attend events organized by volunteer organizations (average score 3.33 → 3.75 out of 7), followed by concerts featuring popular music and music festivals (3.71 → 3.97), as well as cultural offerings for children

and youth (3.08 → 3.25). Conversely, jurors showed less interest in organized tours, guided excursions, or nature experiences (3.13 → 2.63), festivals (2.98 → 2.52), and performances featuring theater and musicals (3.38 → 3.11). They also reported an increased interest in visiting libraries, but decreased interest in ballet and dance performances.

Bodø2024 ECOC also appeared to broaden engagement among minorities and youth, while raising awareness of Sámi culture and ecological issues (Projects report; Program events report). Sámi inclusion was particularly prominent, with 11% of the program dedicated to Sámi culture, language, and heritage. Volunteers acted as cultural ambassadors, with a high willingness to recommend participation to others (average “recommend” score: 6.39 out of 7) (Volunteers report). The Frivillig2024 project [Volunteer2024] served as a distinctive example of inclusion, enabling people with diverse backgrounds and interests to contribute through roles such as arena hosting, catering, crafts, and guidance. Pensioners and people with disabilities contributed significantly, often working longer hours than other groups. People with immigrant background and students were also engaged, though they tended to work fewer hours.

CHALLENGES

Still, Monitor2024 data shows that Bodø2024 ECOC did not reach all potential attendees. Audience mobilization and growth were therefore limited compared to its full potential. Notably, 60% of People’s Jury members had never attended a Bodø2024 ECOC event, suggesting that while the initiative had symbolic value, boosting civic pride due to Bodø2024 ECOC, it did not translate into widespread direct participation (Peoples’ jury report). Some Jury members felt the program became repetitive or too narrow over time, and others perceived it as elitist. This sentiment was echoed by some young participants, who felt the events were irrelevant to their

lives. Although UNG2024, described in section 4.1, was well-funded and active, only a small fraction of upper secondary pupils participated (Adolescence report). Only 10% of the upper secondary pupils agree that the ECOC Bodø2024 concerns them (Adolescence report).

Interesting quote from a young project leader (Projects report):

“Another challenge was getting young people to come. I live in Oslo, where there is already a strong culture of participating in cultural experiences. In Bodø we had to work to get youth to see theatre. [...] Building cultural habits takes time – and requires effort.”

On related notes, the communication strategy of Bodø2024 IKS team emerged as a key challenge. Respondents indicated that Bodø2024 IKS’s public communication was often perceived as unclear and unstructured. Many residents did not know how to access event information and found the website and the cultural calendar difficult to navigate. For example, the online cultural calendar, being the main source of program information—, was seen as incomplete, frequently updated, lacking detailed descriptions, and was difficult to navigate when accessed on a mobile phone (Projects report). Additionally, local media coverage was limited, often providing only basic factual reporting and failing to foster broader public awareness or critical engagement (Projects report, Social media report).



Volunteer Celebration – March 11, 2021| Photo: David Engmo

4.2.3 Potential impacts and implications

What kind of legacy will the Bodø2024 ECOC initiative leave for cultural participation? Although Bodø2024 ECOC successfully met its short-term goals by increasing attendance at cultural events, the key question remains whether it will lead to lasting cultural transformation in Nordland.

On the one hand, the expanded audience base may stimulate future demand for more diverse cultural offerings (Volunteers report). Surveys show that artists and cultural workers anticipate a rise in public interest in arts and culture as a long-term effect of Bodø2024 ECOC (Artists report). Interviews also reflect optimism for sustained audience engagement. Yet, data from the Peoples Jury indicate that individuals who were less interested before, did not engage much and do not

envision changing behavior in this respect (Peoples' jury report).

However, skepticism persists regarding the extent of structural change Bodø2024 ECOC will bring. The legacy of Bodø2024 ECOC is fragile, as audience gains risk being temporary without institutional anchoring and sustained funding. (Projects report).

“

Approving Quotations from the People's Jury:

Thank you to Bodø 2024 for many fine experiences.

Very satisfied. Especially liked the larger events such as the opening and Midsummer Mystery.

Good that it was spread across the whole of Nordland. I would have liked to have bus trips to the various events. Great that the royals attended. There should have been some promotion for Narvik 2029.

The effort aimed at young people, and that there was focus on local and Sami culture.

One can hardly overestimate the value Bodø2024 has had in making Bodø known, both through coverage and through the visits connected to the larger events/ concerts etc. People who can speak positively about Bodø in other contexts. The municipality's contribution was minimal compared with what, for example, Trondheim spent on the ski world championships, for a very narrow target group that is interested in Nordic skiing.

“

“

Critical Quotations from the People's Jury:

The cultural year was a waste of time and money. The money should have been used for school provision and children's living conditions.

Far too much was concentrated in and around Bodø. Nordland is large, and the districts should have received far, far more.

Bodø 2024 has come across as a jazzed-up Music Festival Week, with events mainly for the upper set and less for my areas of interest.

It has appeared as a niche arrangement, and it is mostly the five per cent community in Bodø who seem to benefit from it. A real belly flop.

From the first day, B2024 created disagreements/polarisation rather than unity and community around the fantastic opportunity Bodø had been given.

It is strange that it has been completely quiet about Bodø 2024 after New Year, both from the organisers and about the event as a whole.

“Bodø2024 was for tourists and the cultural elite, not for us.”

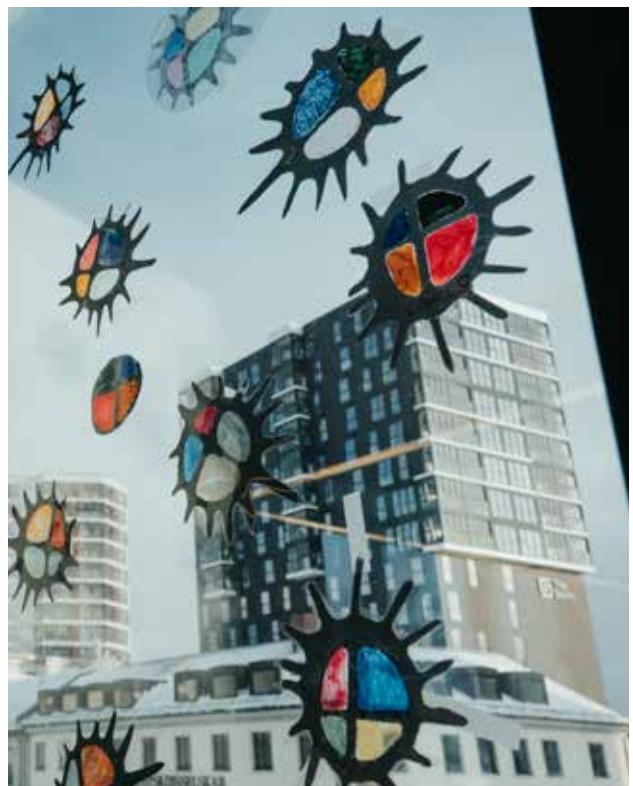
“



Sami National Day 2023 | Photo: Fredrik Stenbro



Sami Culture Week 2023 | Photo: Fredrik Stenbro



4.3. Strategic Priority: “Connections and Capacity”

4.3.1 Bodø2024 ambitions – improved cultural infrastructure!

Bodø2024 ECOC was seen as a unique opportunity to act as a game changer for cultural and community life in Nordland. It aimed to build cultural capacity across the region through collaboration and knowledge sharing.

In this sense, Bodø2024 ECOC was supposed to serve as a catalyst for the further development of cultural infrastructure by strengthening cross-regional and international cooperation among cultural institutions, while also promoting the professionalization of art institutions without marginalizing amateur contributors.

The initiative aimed to achieve several key outcomes (Bodø2024, 2019):

1. Increased skills and professionalism within the cultural sector.
2. Enhanced collaboration between amateurs and professionals.
3. Expanded international partnerships and cultural exchanges.
4. Integration of the cultural sector into urban development plans.

Bodø2024 anticipated impacts Key area “Connections and Capacity”

- 20% increase in cultural workforce
- Each of Nordland's 10 main towns recognized as cultural hotspots
- Bodø and Nordland positioned as best-practice examples of cultural capacity building
- Sustainable cultural infrastructure supporting long-term growth beyond 2024



First lego league 2024 | Photo: David Engmo

4.3.2 MONITOR2024 assessment

MAJOR BASELINE

Before Bodø2024 title year, the overall cultural system employed 2.9% of Nordland's workforce, and 4.7% in Bodø (Baseline report). Within the cultural system employment, 47.8% were in creative industries, 34.2% in attractions, 12% in cultural education, and 6% in retail (Baseline report).

Some cities in Nordland had some clear ambitions in their cultural strategies. In Bodø, the strategy underscored the intent to enhance connections with Europe by engaging with diverse European cultures and reinforcing existing cultural institutions. The strategy also emphasized capacity building, targeting the enhancement of cultural facilities, staff competence, and international collaborations. In Rana municipality, one primary concern was adapting organizational structures and facilities to better align with demographic changes and economic constraints. In Narvik, the importance of developing meeting places and leisure activities for children and young people was emphasized, especially to provide in-depth capacity building opportunities that can form the basis for secondary and higher education in art and cultural subjects.

BODØ2024 MAJOR ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

Survey results indicate that 87% of program event organizers agreed that their events contributed to the development of skills and competencies (Program events report). Several projects supported by Bodø2024 were developed with idea to extend beyond the event year. Such projects as UNG2024, Frivillig2024, Ecological Economics, and projects with Sámi Perspective, were specifically designed to build competencies and networks, and form cultural connections among different stakeholders in Nordland.

Bodø2024 ECOC intended to instigate, strengthen and expand artistic professional networks rather than invest in buildings and other physical infrastructure. A survey of artists and cultural workers highlighted strong participation in Bodø2024 IKS-organized meetings and courses, as well as increased access to regional, national, and international professional networks (Artists report). Many expressed a desire to sustain these connections.

Many project leaders elaborated on their projects as valuable experiences in capacity building, enhancing confidence, leadership, and professional competence:



"It is clear that we have strengthened the institution just by being able to collaborate with the other theatres at this level. And we have really achieved that through Bodø2024"

"The combination of new contacts, new opportunities, new friendships. It is a success because synergies arise"

"So what was important in this project was to explore other formats and new technology to tell about Sami traditions in new ways. We will use this methodology to continue working on producing new content with other indigenous peoples, to explore indigenous storytelling internationally"

"We know that there are many actors that we have worked with, who have gained new networks, gained new partners, developed new products based on the work we have done. We also gained increased competence within the organization, especially in this regard with project work and application writing and access to new financiers, which will be important for us going forward. We experience that we have gained a greater role as a development actor within the county municipality"



That Was Bodø2024 | Photo: Fredrik Stenbro

Bodø2024 IKS provided training, mentorship, and development of toolkits (e.g., volunteer handbooks, project management guides), contributing to strengthened skills and professionalism in the cultural sector. Initiatives like Vogram (in partnership with Tartu ECOC) aimed to professionalize volunteer coordination and offer EU-standard recommendation letters.

Notably, 54% of program events included amateur performers, and 33% of performers were under the age of 30- highlighting Bodø2024's focus on nurturing future generations of artists. Several instances specifically highlight collaboration between professionals and amateurs/volunteers/youth, e.g. Choirs involved collaboration between professional composers/musicians and local amateur choirs, Opera Productions (e.g., Querinioperaen) involved collaboration between professionals and locals/volunteers.

Bodø2024 ECOC fostered extensive collaboration, mobilizing 12,300 performer engagements⁵, including nearly 3,000 international performers from 57 countries. Over 700 partnerships were formed, and 90% of program event organizers reported cross-sector collaboration, indicating strengthened cultural networks (Program events report). Norwegian media analysis supports this narrative, emphasizing cross-sector partnerships and creative networks, particularly collaborative projects in schools and cultural centers (Press media report). For example, UNG2024 and Frivillig2024 were designed as region-wide initiatives, with youth and volunteer

networks established in over 20 municipalities.

The international dimension was further strengthened through the launch of EU-supported projects such as De(con)fining and Ecology Squared, which connected Bodø with cities in Africa and Europe. Projects like Via Querinissima and Heritage Dialogues linked Nordland to broader European heritage networks. The projects positioned Nordland as a cultural hub with increasing

Some examples of Bodø2024 ECOC program events for building capacity and connections

- “Feeding Europe” enabled local professionals to scale up and build international collaboration
- Eurogym brought more than 3000 gymnasts to Bodø for a festival
- Events delivered by Åarjelhsaemien Teater were prepared in collaboration with Nordland Teater

⁵ Performer-engagement concept implies that some performers could have participated in several events.



international visibility and collaboration. Events such as Feeding Europe and Arts of Democracy enabled local professionals to scale up their work and gain access to international collaborative spaces. The project My European Story contributed to the capacity building of young performers through skill development, personal growth, and networking. In this project eighth-grade pupils from schools in Bodø, Vefsn, Vestvågøy, Narvik, Serbia, Iceland, Germany, Poland, Portugal and Finland shared stories about their lives and local communities, connecting more closely with European youth (Program events report).

Bodø2024 ECOC also contributed significantly to the economic impact of the cultural program. Through co-financing and fundraising requirements, the program generated a multiplier effect of 2.45, meaning that for every NOK funded by Bodø2024 IKS in projects and program events, a total of NOK 2.45 was generated (Program events report). Analysis shows that program events organized outside Bodø were particularly successful in mobilizing external funding, demonstrating strong local fundraising capacity (Program events report).

OUTCOMES

ACHIEVEMENTS

Our assessment indicates that Bodø2024 ECOC title year contributed to the expansion of networks among cultural professionals and improved their ability to secure external funding, with EU co-funding was present in 10% of events (Program events report). Many projects co-funded by Bodø2024 IKS enhanced project management and funding application skills (Projects report). Through the use of co-financing and partnership models, Bodø2024 IKS helped program event organizers attract additional external funding sources.

In addition, Bodø2024 ECOC has contributed to improved networking (Program events report). 70% of program event coordinators reported that their event positively contributed to networking – whether locally, regionally, nationally, or internationally (Program events report). Examples included collaborations between local and international artists, artists across different genres (music, visual arts, theatre, film, literature, etc.), between established artists and emerging artists/youth. Institutional collaboration was also important, such as collaboration between different municipalities in the region, partnerships with educational institutions (e.g., Nord University, cultural schools), collaboration with national and international bodies (e.g., Sámi Parliament, other European Capitals of Culture). It included also partnerships with businesses and sponsors (e.g., Bodø Energi) and extensive international collaboration.

The experience of managing Bodø2024 ECOC related projects enabled local actors to develop valuable skills in budgeting, reporting, and international collaboration (Artists report, Projects report). These were reported as beneficial for future work. Norwegian media analysis confirms that Bodø2024 was widely perceived as a catalyst for capacity building (Press media report). Artists and cultural workers acknowledged the value of extended networks, particularly benefiting younger groups (Artists report).

CHALLENGES

However, these intended outcomes should be nuanced. First, artists and cultural workers pointed out the lack of direct outreach from Bodø2024 ECOC. Many learned about the initiative through media or sporadic meetings, without direct communication, leading to missed opportunities and a sense of exclusion. The survey among artists and cultural workers shows that while 72% of artists wanted to be involved, only 32% had events included in the cultural program, and just 18% applied

for funding (Artists report), indicating that many missed the opportunities Bodø2024 ECOC could have provided, especially during the early planning stages (Projects report). Artists outside Bodø, particularly in Nordland and Troms/Finnmark, felt less informed and supported (Projects report).

Second, several cultural professionals criticized the unclear selection process for projects and non-transparent communication from the Bodø2024 IKS team. For example, there was confusion about whether artists should propose projects or wait to be invited (Projects report). Similarly, artists expected municipalities to facilitate collaboration, but their roles were unclear. Many felt that Bodø2024 ECOC title year prioritized tourism and business interests over the needs of the cultural sector, with insufficient communication about audience development and local engagement (Projects report). Surveys show that crafts, performing arts, and Sámi artists felt more engaged, while visual artists felt excluded (Artists report).

Despite Bodø2024 IKS's capacity-building efforts, it obviously could not reach everyone. Challenges in project management and capacity building were still reported. One possible reason is that the scale of Bodø2024 ECOC projects often exceeded the capacity of local teams, leading to logistical and administrative difficulties. As one organizer of a festival reported:

“We have never done something like this before... How on earth do you make these procurements?”

Interviews also revealed that limited funding was a recurring issue as many project leaders reported that Bodø2024 IKS grants were modest and often insufficient to realize their full visions (Projects report).

Over time, the Bodø2024 IKS team adapted its project selection and communication processes, shifting from a centralized model to a more collaborative and responsive approach. However, artists and organizers noted that legacy plans were not communicated or required from the outset, leading to uncertainty about the long-term impact of Bodø2024 ECOC for them (Artists report). Thus, communication remained a critical issue, as two different project leaders reported:

“It was unclear if Bodø2024 was looking for specific performers or if we should come up with ideas.”

“It has been extremely frustrating for so many in the region... a great deal of collegial frustration due to the lack of clarity in the strategy.”

4.3.3 Potential impacts and implications

In our view, Bodø2024 ECOC has laid a strong foundation for sustainable cultural development through networking, partnerships, and capacity building. Artists and organizers involved in Bodø2024 expressed an interest in continued collaboration, indicating a positive shift toward a strengthened cultural ecosystem in Nordland. They also expressed long-term expectations for expanded networking arenas and international contacts (Artists report).

Many projects contributed to improved project management skills, new partnerships, and greater visibility for local institutions, thereby laying groundwork for future cultural production.

There are clear signs of Bodø2024 ECOC's lasting impact on the cultural sector, as some projects initiated during the year are now being institutionalized. For example, Frivillig Bodø (Volunteer Bodø) was established in spring 2025 as a direct continuation of the Frivillig2024 program. It aims to sustain volunteer networks, support civic engagement, and provide infrastructure for future cultural events. Training materials, handbooks, and EU-standard recommendation systems developed during Bodø2024 have been developed for long-term application by municipalities and cultural institutions. Projects like Cabins of Culture and Nordlandsruta created both physical and symbolic cultural spaces in nature and rural areas, encouraging continued use of non-traditional venues.

Youth-led structures, such as UNG Crew, 2024Nettverket, and Ung Kultur Teamet, were designed to continue operating beyond 2024, fostering youth leadership, cultural participation, and regional collaboration. The school subject Ecological Economics, promoted as a part of the Ecological Economics project under

Bodø2024, was introduced in upper secondary schools in Bodø, with plans for national rollout. Textbooks are currently in development, and the subject has been approved by the Norwegian Directorate for Education.

Finally, the establishment of Bodø2024 Legacy AS as a dedicated organization supporting cultural actors in applying for EU and other external funding represents a structural mechanism to maintain the international networks and competencies developed during 2024.

Despite these clear successes, there is a need for future follow-up to assess whether, and especially how, Bodø2024 ECOC title year has improved career prospects for artists, cultural leaders and organizers, and whether it has truly acted as a game changer for cultural and community life in Nordland. It remains unclear how many initiatives will require sustained support beyond 2024 (Press media report). The established networks also need maintenance. Their sustainability will strongly depend on whether municipalities incorporate the cultural outcomes of Bodø2024 ECOC into their long-term strategies – an effort likely to be uneven and dependent on political will and available resources. Potential municipal budget cuts, especially in Bodø, pose a threat to the sustainability of cultural initiatives. Since culture is not recognized as urgent or basic need, it is often among the first areas to face reductions.

4.4. Strategic Priority: “City Development”

4.4.1. Bodø2024 ambitions – culture as driving force for urban development

The fourth area of Bodø2024 ECoC ambitions was to position Bodø and Nordland as a modern, internationally profiled region that integrates culture into urban development.

The ECOC status was supposed to embed cultural and social engagement in the planning of Bodø's new city area after the NATO airbase relocation.⁶ Bodø2024 aimed at creating a smart, sustainable, and culturally vibrant city that would attract talent, innovation, and creative industries. In this sense, Bodø2024 was supposed to help transforming former military buildings into artist-run cultural hubs and make culture a central driver of city growth.

Bodø2024 expected to achieve the following outcomes (Bodø2024, 2019):

1. Increased awareness of culture's role in city development among planners and citizens.
2. Creation of inclusive meeting places that connect individuals and communities.
3. Stronger link between cultural identity and urban innovation.
4. Attraction of new settlers, creative businesses, and cultural professionals to Bodø.

Bodø2024 goals/intended impacts Key area “City Development”

- Bodø recognized as a model for culture-based urban development in Europe
- 20% increase in new workers coming to Nordland and Bodø
- 100% growth in creative businesses and 10% increase in tourism jobs
- Long-term transformation of Bodø into a cultural hotspot and sustainable city

⁶ For more information about this, please visit <https://www.hightnorthnews.com/en/possible-future-military-role-bodos-new-airport>

4.4.2 MONITOR2024 assessment

MAJOR BASELINE

Bodø and Nordland have a relatively well-developed cultural infrastructure, including museums, libraries, festivals, and creative industries (Baseline report). Cultural events had measurable economic impacts (e.g., increased activity and tourism during festivals), supporting the ambition to use culture as a growth engine. Before Bodø2024 ECOC title year, the tourism industry in Nordland had created a value of NOK 5.25 billion in 2021, with Bodø standing for 33.9% (Baseline report). In the same period, accommodation capacity in Bodø grew from 1,887 beds (2016) to 2,590 (2022) (Baseline report). Cruise tourism has increased from 5 ships (2010) to 29 ships (2022) with an expected 40 by 2025.

Bodø accounted for more than a third of the turnover in Nordland's cultural industries but was still lagging behind national leaders like Oslo. Data shows a steady growth in creative industries, with Bodø and Nordland seeing a significant increase in the number of firms in arts, entertainment, design, media, and architecture which are growing in Bodø and Nordland, contributing to urban innovation. Between 2009 and 2023, the number of firms in creative arts & entertainment category in Nordland grew from 250 to 645, a 158% increase. Bodø2024 could have therefore stimulated the development of creative industries even further by attracting new talents, especially in the creative and service sectors, which are underdeveloped in Northern Norway. It is also expected to improve career opportunities for cultural professionals, which could help attract and retain workers.

Cultural strategies in Bodø and Nordland emphasized

integrating culture into urban planning, especially for cities like Bodø, Narvik, and Mo i Rana, through the transformation of public spaces for cultural use. From a city development perspective, the relocation of the NATO airbase was seen as a major opportunity for urban redevelopment, where Bodø2024 ECOC could have been a catalyst for more inclusive and participatory planning. However, transforming military buildings into cultural hubs required stronger policy frameworks and investment, which were not fully in place.

While cultural planning was mentioned in municipal strategies, the MONITOR2024 Baseline report showed limited concrete integration of cultural and social engagement into the actual urban planning processes before Bodø2024 ECOC. The cultural sector was underrepresented compared to national averages in terms of employment and education (Baseline report). The region struggled with youth outmigration and limited cultural education opportunities. That was affecting its attractiveness as a modern, vibrant place to live and work. The region could offer few higher education programs in arts and culture in Nordland, which limited the region's ability to attract and retain creative talent (Baseline report).

International media coverage of Bodø2024 prior to the title year was limited but impactful. Large international publishers such as Lonely Planet and Forbes have written articles about the city and the region which indicated significant potential for Nordland's global visibility. E.g. Forbes has published 3 articles: "Norway's Bodø Unveils Arctic-Themed European Capital of Culture Program For 2024", "Norway's Bodø Plans 1,000 Cultural Events In 2024" and "Norway's Bodø Named A European Capital Of Culture For 2024".

BODØ2024 MAJOR ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

Bodø2024 ECOC title year contributed to positioning Bodø and Nordland as a modern, internationally profiled region through its programming, ensuring representation from 57 countries among performers and including international artists in 50% of events (Program events report). Projects like De(con)fining and Arts of Democracy showcased global collaboration, and several conferences attracted international delegates. Also, in Norwegian media Bodø2024 was widely portrayed as a symbolic and strategic milestone, with media referring to it as a "catalyst" and "historic cultural event" (Press media report). Coverage emphasized regional pride, cultural significance, and visibility on the European stage.

Bodø2024 ECOC has also helped strengthen integration of culture into urban development, by embedding cultural programming into urban spaces. 63% of organizers used both existing and new venues, integrating program events into urban space. Bodø2024 also stimulated use of unconventional spaces and outdoor venues (nature-based experiences, walking tours). Events like Lysvandring activated public spaces with light installations during dark hours, while events like Open Art and Barnas Internasjonale Dag [Children's International Day] were designed as inclusive, participatory spaces. There was also evidence of infrastructure upgrades (e.g. Nordland Museum, NOUA exhibition center).

In parallel, Bodø2024 ECOC's work under the Ecological Economics priority introduced Utopia workshops (Utopiverksted) with adults and young people, where participants were invited to formulate shared values and imagine the kind of future city and region they wanted to live in. These workshops functioned as democratic arenas that brought municipalities, schools,

and civil society into dialogue, and they showed how cultural programming can also be used as a method for participatory, sustainability-oriented urban development.

However, as of today, we don't have data yet that shows that Bodø2024 ECOC directly contributed to the formal integration of culture into municipal urban planning. Neither do we have data on policy changes or planning frameworks influenced by Bodø2024 ECOC. While cultural infrastructure and artistic ambition were highlighted in Norwegian media, explicit integration of Bodø2024 into urban development plans was less visible in public discourse (Press media report).

Regarding the ambition to create a smart, sustainable, and culturally vibrant city that attracts talent, innovation, and creative industries, Bodø2024 ECOC has partially contributed to this during the title year. A company Bodø2024 IKS was established with 20 employees and secured NOK 310 million budget where NOK 135 million were allocated to cultural sector and suppliers, creating spin-off effects. Bodø2024 ECOC was perceived as a driver of artistic innovation, with emphasis on experimental work, creative risk-taking, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, suggesting potential for attracting talent (Press media report).

Clearly, with its extended cultural programming encompassing 434 program events, with broad genre diversity (art, music, nature, youth, Sámi themes), Bodø2024 contributed to improving cultural vibrancy. 33% of performers were under 30, indicating the importance of youth engagement. Events like LEGO SPIKE and Open Art fostered innovation and inclusion. Bodø2024 has also invested in digital outreach, achieving strong engagement on platforms like TikTok and Instagram (e.g., UNG2024 had nearly 5,000 followers). However, beyond that, we cannot find

much emphasis on smart city technologies, digital infrastructure, or creative industry clusters. The "smart" and "sustainable" city narrative in mass media was not deeply developed when describing the effects of Bodø2024 ECOC title year. So far, we don't have access to data on talent retention, startup creation, or innovation hubs.

Finally, regarding the use of ECOC status to plan Bodø's new city area - including transformation of the former military buildings and making culture a central driver of city growth - we have no evidence that the Bodø2024 ECOC program events and ECOC cultural status embedded cultural and social engagement in planning Bodø's new city area (after NATO airbase relocation). No program events appear explicitly linked to urban redevelopment or strategic spatial planning. Our reports do not find evidence of Bodø2024 ECOC links to the NATO airbase relocation or connection to urban planning (Program events report). In mass media, culture was portrayed as a driver of civic pride and regional identity but not explicitly linked to the physical redevelopment of military sites (Press media report).

OUTCOMES

When it comes to increased awareness of culture's role in city development among planners and citizens, our data shows that this objective was only partially achieved. Media coverage frequently linked cultural vitality to urban quality of life, identity, and livability, indicating Bodø2024 ECOC's symbolic significance for the city and its potential to generate long-term value. Program event organizers (artists and cultural workers) demonstrated that they have experienced a shift in how cultural spaces were perceived and utilized (Artists report). However, while some evidence of citizens' awareness exists, planners' perspectives were less visible in public discourse (Press media report). The

same applies to youths as many did not associate cultural events with city development or planning (Adolescence report).

Regarding the creation of inclusive meeting places that connect individuals and communities, data from MONITOR2024 shows partial achievement of this objective. The theme of community engagement was dominant in public discourse (Press media report), with strong emphasis on grassroots initiatives, volunteer networks, and neighborhood events. Media described Bodø2024 ECOC as a civic process, fostering intergenerational dialogue, cultural education, and social inclusion. Inclusive meeting places were framed as both physical venues and social experiences (Projects report, Program events report). Among the program events, several were aimed to create arenas for dialogue and inclusion, particularly those focusing on Sámi culture. These events aimed to raise awareness about Sámi traditions and foster a deeper understanding of controversial issues in Sámi history.

Youths expressed a strong desire for inclusive meeting places, especially for socializing and building self-esteem (Adolescence report). Some events (e.g., Hjertebank Festival, UNG Scene) served as meeting arenas, but many young people still felt a lack of such spaces in their home municipalities. Cultural events were seen as potential arenas for inclusion, but sports and nature were more dominant in fulfilling social needs (Students report). However, we don't know whether these meeting places will persist beyond 2024, as so far there is no data on whether cultural events led to sustained community networks or institutions.

When it comes to building stronger links between cultural identity and urban innovation, this objective is also somewhat achieved (Press media report). In mass media, cultural events were described as expressions of Bodø's creative identity, contributing to urban transformation (Press media report). However, the



The Bike Ride 2022 | Photo: Fredrik Stenbro

link to urban innovation is maybe more symbolic than structurally documented. So far, we cannot document explicit connections to urban innovation frameworks or smart city initiatives, where culture was influencing technological, architectural, or infrastructure innovations.

Finally, it is premature to evaluate objectives regarding attracting new settlers, creative businesses, and cultural professionals to Bodø. As of today, the MONITOR2024 team does not yet have data on increased settlement or business relocation. While visibility and artistic collaboration were strong, there is no indication of Bodø2024 ECOC having impact on in-migration or economic clustering of creative industries. On the contrary, some creative workers noted that there were artists who expressed a desire to move to Bodø, but did not do it because of a lack of cultural infrastructure and an artistic community:

“There are many who have contacted us over the past year [2024] - artists and cultural actors who want to move to Bodø. Many have gotten to the point where they looked at housing, but they stopped because they couldn't find a studio [cultural infrastructure]. It's also about community and a place to meet, and a place to create art. But what has happened in the last six months is that many people have started to leave. They are leaving because they can't find that community.”

Regarding youth, our reports document youth settlement intentions, not on actual migration or business attraction (Adolescence report). No data is yet provided on creative businesses or cultural professionals relocating to Bodø. This should be the subject of a follow-up study.

4.4.3 Potential impacts and implications

While Bodø2024 was described as a symbolic milestone and a catalyst for cultural engagement, there is no clear evidence in the media coverage that Bodø was recognized internationally as a model for culture-based urban development. National media treated Bodø2024 as a case study for cultural policy (Press media report). Analysis of international media shows that Bodø2024 ECOC was mostly associated with being attractive tourist destination, where experience of culture and nature integrates, due to the title year, and for its cultural heritage. Thus, European-level recognition being a model for culture-based urban development was not yet documented.

When it comes to the intended impacts of Bodø2024—such as a 20% increase in new workers coming to Nordland and Bodø, 100% growth in creative businesses, and a 10% increase in tourism jobs—it is still too early to draw conclusions about these long-term effects. However, short-term impacts are already visible.

Statistics show that hotel overnight stays in Bodø increased by as much as 34% from 2023 to 2024—a clear indication of heightened activity and interest related to the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) title year (SSB 2025). Growth in the number of hotel overnight stays in Nordland in 2024 was higher than in Troms, suggesting that Bodø2024 ECOC likely contributed to this increase. In Salten as a whole, growth was more moderate, with an increase of 4%, which still demonstrates that more visitors also found their way to the surrounding areas.

The increase in Bodø was driven both by more Norwegian visitors (+28%) and a significant rise in international overnight stays (+59%). For Salten overall, the level among Norwegian guests remained stable, while there was a 12% increase in foreign visitors. Among international guests, the largest groups were from Germany (22%), Sweden (15%), the USA (10%), and France (6%). Regarding reasons for visiting, 47% cited holiday/leisure, 38% work, and 15% courses/conferences.

Also, MONITOR2024 scenario simulations of Bodø development by 2036 estimate that direct expenditures related to Bodø2024 can increase turnover in tourism-related industries, direct and induced increases in sales, a larger available workforce, and positive consumption effects stemming from the growing population as well as increased operating income among organizations operating in Bodø (Scenario report). The best-case scenario shows that Bodø2024 ECOC can generate a total of NOK 1.24 billion over the 15 years simulated (an average of NOK 82 million per year). The report also shows potentials for reduced outmigration by over 100 people/year, as well as an increased demand for housing and services. However, this development assumes that future development is not affected by decisions of the City Hall that can reverse the foundation for spin-off effects, where legacy of Bodø2024 ECOC can be threatened by resource scarcity and municipal cutbacks.

When it comes to growth culture related jobs, NAV figures (2025) show a decline in culture-related jobs from 2022 to 2024, though the decrease was smaller than the previous trend. Bodø2024 ECOC may have helped mitigate this decline—further data from 2025 and 2026 will provide a clearer picture.

Can Bodø2024 ECOC assure long-term transformation of Bodø into a cultural hotspot and sustainable city? Bodø2024 ECOC is portrayed as a cultural catalyst, with strong emphasis on artistic innovation, community engagement, and regional pride (Press media report). In newspaper articles, a Bodø's cultural infrastructure, visibility, and creative identity was highlighted indicating increased cultural attention to the city, but it is far from certain that this alone will create a trajectory toward becoming a cultural hotspot. Some cultural projects have laid down a foundation for long-term mindset shift toward ecological and cultural resilience. However, long-term transformation remains aspirational rather than confirmed.

4.5. Strategic Priority: “Freedom of Expression”

4.5.1. Bodø2024 goals – improved cultural democracy!

The final fifth area was related to Freedom of Expression. Bodø2024 ECoC was intended to become a platform for cultural democracy, addressing threats to freedom of speech and artistic expression (Bodø2024, 2019).

Art and culture were to be used as tools to promote dialogue on difficult topics such as oppression, intolerance, and disinformation. Freedom of expression should be integrated into school curricula and cultural events, fostering especially awareness among young people. As a result, Bodø and Nordland should be positioned as champions of democratic values in Europe.

Bodø2024 ECoC expected to achieve the following outcomes (Bodø2024, 2019):

1. Increased public awareness and engagement on issues of freedom of expression.
2. Stronger networks for persecuted writers and artists, offering safe spaces and platforms.
3. Enhanced dialogue between cultures, reducing xenophobia and populism.
4. Schools adopting democracy-focused cultural education linked to Bodø2024 themes.

Bodø2024 anticipated impacts Key area “Freedom of Expression”

- Nordland recognized as a best-practice example of cultural democracy
- Bodø2024 contributes to European efforts to safeguard freedom of expression
- Long-term cultural infrastructure supporting open dialogue and tolerance
- Strengthened European identity through shared democratic values



Giellavahkku 2022 | Photo: BYRAA

4.5.2 MONITOR2024 assessment

MAJOR BASELINE

Our Baseline report notes that the state of cultural infrastructure and engagement in Nordland was uneven prior to Bodø2024 ECOC. While there were many cultural institutions in Nordland and Bodø, access and inclusion vary significantly across municipalities (Baseline report). There was a clear need to connect with groups not yet engaged in cultural life, including individuals facing isolation or mental health challenges. Similarly, our media analysis shows that although cultural topics were regularly covered in the local press, freedom of expression was not a prominent theme (Press media report). Younger generations appeared more receptive to cultural programming addressing democratic values and considered culture as a tool for dialogue, yet such offerings remained limited and did not consistently engage with the issues of free speech (Peoples' jury report). Thus, there was limited integration of freedom of expression into cultural discourse at the baseline stage.

The Baseline report shows that public discourse on culture was growing, but media analysis revealed that cultural topics remained underrepresented in local news coverage (Baseline report). Thus, there was a limited use of cultural platforms to address controversial or difficult topics (Baseline report). Low cultural participation among minority groups, including indigenous and immigrant communities was highlighted (Baseline report). However, greater inclusion and cultural dialogue can be viewed as means to keep minority-identifying individuals considering moving away (Peoples' jury report).

Thus, the baseline revealed a fragmented cultural landscape with few mechanisms for sustained dialogue across cultures prior to Bodø2024. The Baseline report also identified some gaps in cultural higher education offerings, especially outside Bodø as most of the arts and culture education programs were concentrated in Levanger (Trøndelag), not Nordland.

BODØ2024 MAJOR ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

Bodø2024 ECOC encompassed an extensive program to address freedom of expression goals. There were many democracy-themed events and collaborations with immigrant associations and international artists. Events like Arts of Democracy in collaboration with International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) featured concerts, exhibitions, and performances exploring democracy, tolerance, human rights, and freedom of speech. Such events were explicitly designed to use art as a tool for critical reflection and discourse generation. The program also ensured participation from artists originating from countries with limited democratic freedoms, who shared personal experiences through their work. UNG2024 included events like See Clearly, Speak Freely, which encouraged youth to engage with themes of democracy and inclusion. Ecological Economics organized utopia workshops across 20+ municipalities where citizens (including youth) discussed values and democratic futures. The workshops were designed to foster bottom-up dialogue and civic engagement.

Minority voices and immigrant communities were systematically included in program events. Bodø2024 hosted several international conferences (e.g., NAISA, Ecological Economics) and collaborated with other ECOCs (e.g., Tartu, Nova Gorica) to share best practices in cultural democracy and inclusion. Collaborations with Bodø International Associations created arenas for dialogue on human rights and democracy, as well as opportunities to showcase cultural heritage and promote cultural exchange. Bodø2024 provided platforms for persecuted artists, especially through events under Arts of Democracy and De(con)fining. Events included Iranian artists and representatives from immigrant associations, offering visibility and voice to marginalized groups. Bodø2024 in collaboration with several local partners supported Kyiv Soloists, a Ukrainian ensemble

displaced by war, offering them refuge and performance opportunities.

Bodø2024 has also contributed to hosting a Festival of Freedom. The events such as this were designed to confront intolerance and xenophobia, making Bodø2024 a platform for cultural advocacy. 47% of program event organizers also agreed that their events have also addressed some of those controversial topics (Program events report).

In Norwegian mass media which described Bodø2024 events, artistic freedom emerged as recurring theme, particularly in Bodø-based media that emphasized experimental, provocative, and cross-disciplinary work (Press media report). The media highlighted controversial artworks, including those addressing nationalism, identity politics, and environmental critique, sparking debates about morality and provocation in public art. However, while freedom of expression was implicitly supported, there was no explicit framing of Bodø2024 as a platform for defending free speech or countering its threats (Press media report).

While traditional media primarily highlighted artistic freedom and provocative works, the most vivid expression of democratic debate occurred in the digital space (Social media report). Social media communities became the principal arena where discourse surrounding artistic expression unfolded and evolved throughout the year. In this arena, freedom of expression was treated as a lived social practice, which was questioned, negotiated, and often contested. Cultural events linked to Indigenous communities, in particular, triggered intense and polarized discussions. Debates arose often around the inclusion, representation, and whether individuals were "allowed" to voice critical or unpopular opinions. Exchanges were often emotionally charged, varying between irony, satire, and open confrontation. At the same time, minority and youth voices became increasingly visible and assertive, as they used digital

forums to advocate inclusion and to change dominant narratives and tokenization of Indigenous culture, heritage, and belonging (Social media report).

Bodø2024 ECOC has also created a broad and inclusive volunteer program Frivillig2024, engaging over 600 volunteers from diverse backgrounds (including Ukrainian, Somali, Russian, Arabic speakers – 36 languages represented) and 243 organizations, including minority and immigrant associations, to co-create cultural events (Volunteers report). Frivillig2024 was explicitly framed as a civic platform to promote cultural democracy, inclusion, and participation. Volunteers contributed across 15 task categories, such as social media, hosting, and cultural support, which enabled events that would not have been possible otherwise. The program fostered civic engagement, social cohesion, and cultural participation – key pillars of cultural democracy.

The most important flagship of Bodø2024 ECOC title year was a combination of program events and projects focused on Sámi culture. A Sámi coordinator was appointed to support project leaders in integrating Sámi perspectives respectfully and accurately. Bodø2024 emphasized cross-cultural dialogue and included Sámi voices in planning and execution, though challenges in local representation remained. 11% of program events organized with help of Bodø2024 addressed Sámi themes and Sámi artists were actively engaged in thematic events highlighting indigenous voices (Program events report, Projects report). Sámi projects used theatre, film, and exhibitions to explore oppression and cultural erosion. The program legitimized especially the inclusion of controversial topics (e.g., Norwegianization, environmental activism, language rights), which brought previously marginalized topics into public discourse.

OUTCOMES

ACHIEVEMENTS

Our evidence shows that Bodø2024 ECOC title year successfully elevated public awareness and engagement on issues of freedom of expression with all potential important consequences this awareness can have on public debate. Even though we could not find targeted campaigns or events explicitly addressing freedom of speech, the fact that Bodø2024 ECOC's program events promoted European diversity themes (65%) and Norwegian cultural heritage (60%), contributed to broaden cultural dialogue and fostering dialogue across identities (Artists report). Artists and cultural workers reported a strong sense of belonging to Norway and Europe, suggesting some resonance with democratic values (Artists report). Artists and cultural workers perceived Bodø2024 ECOC as a platform for dialogue on sensitive issues (Artists report). Controversial artworks and public debates around morality, identity politics, and nationalism, indicated direct engagement with freedom of expression.

Frivillig2024 gave minority associations platforms to express their cultural identities, contributing to pluralism and visibility. Volunteers reported high satisfaction, strong motivation, and a sense of contributing to societal value (Volunteers report), indicating that their engagement created inclusive meeting places and opportunities for dialogue, especially among youth and marginalized groups. Also, young volunteers (Young Crew) expressed that Bodø2024 ECOC gave them a space to be themselves and connect with others who care—indicating social healing and empowerment (Volunteers report).



Sami Culture Week 2023 | Photo: Fredrik Stenbro

CHALLENGES

However, our data also indicates that not all citizen groups were equally affected. While some artists and cultural workers felt empowered by Bodø2024 ECOC, others felt excluded or misunderstood, especially regarding sustainability and local engagement (Artists' report). Analysis of data from Peoples' Jury shows that majority of jurors focused more on civic pride, cultural relevance, and value for money, rather than rights-based or democratic discourse (Peoples' jury report).

Sámi representation in Bodø2024 ECOC program was praised in Norwegian mass media for inclusion and visibility (Press media report). Bodø2024 ECOC largest contribution is in increased visibility for Sámi and minority cultures, increasing public awareness of Sámi history and controversial issues. In Norwegian mass media, Sámi representation was widely discussed and sparked polarized debate that led to emotional and political sensitivities (Press media report). Especially the opening ceremony and other events highlighting Sámi culture were described as politically charged, provoking public debate. While some criticized the limited involvement of local Sámi artists and the risk of misrepresentation, others accused Bodø2024 ECOC of overrepresentation and politicization of Sámi culture. Social media discussions amplified these divides, framing Sámi visibility as either an overdue act of recognition or an excessive political statement. The debates revealed stereotypes, conflicts over legitimacy, and contrasting understanding of the inclusion, ultimately exposing deeper tensions about identity, ownership, and cultural fairness in the Northern Norway (Social media report). In this sense, Bodø2024 ECOC has contributed to public discourse on cultural rights, identity politics, and inclusivity highlighting a difference between symbolic recognition and substantive integration of Sámi culture.

When it comes to building stronger networks for persecuted writers and artists, Bodø 2024 ECOC created several platforms that offered safe spaces and visibility, especially through Arts of Democracy, De(con)fining, but also Frivillig2024 and Sámi-focused projects. Those platforms can be seen as arenas for marginalized voices, including indigenous artists and immigrant communities, that can be also used for persecuted writers and artists. However, given the controversy, it is unclear whether those dedicated networks and platforms will continue in the future, specifically for persecuted writers or artists beyond individual cases

When it comes to the objective focusing, enhanced dialogue between cultures, reducing xenophobia and populism, Bodø2024 IKS supported projects that created safe spaces for dialogue, where dominant narratives can be challenged and voice to underrepresented communities given. In its core, Bodø2024 legitimized controversial topics by embedding them in the official program, allowing artists and organizers to address them without fear of marginalization. These initiatives helped demystify complex issues, encouraged better cross-cultural understanding, and positioned art as a medium for resistance. However, our reports also show that some minority participants felt excluded from broader local engagement, noting that events were attended mostly by their own communities (Volunteers report). This limited integration and fragile volunteer capacity, may hinder long-term impact on xenophobia and populism (Program events report). Moreover, while Bodø2024 ECOC succeeded in giving marginalized voices visibility within the cultural program, this visibility has simultaneously acted as a catalyst for long-standing social tension, intensifying existing conflicts in digital spaces where debates evolved largely outside the organizers' control



Equinor Arctic Race UNG2024 | Photo: Arina Karbovskaya

(Social media report). While dialogue between cultures was evident, there is no direct evidence so far of its effects on reducing xenophobia or populism as a measurable outcome.

When it comes to objective of adopting democracy-focused cultural education into school curricula related to Bodø2024 ECOC themes, there is clear evidence of this outcome materializing. Ecological Economics and UNG2024 are two projects evidently impacting the future democracy-focused education. The subject Ecological Economics has been introduced as a new upper secondary school subject in Bodø, emphasizing dialogue, sustainability, and civic engagement – a major legacy

achievement. The initiative is being considered for national rollout, with textbooks in development (Projects report). The success of the school program is localized, and broader adoption depends on future policy support and resources. Another example is UNG2024 where youth gained skills in cultural production, confidence in public expression, and awareness of democratic values. Even small-scale youth-led events contributed to enduring habits of cultural participation and civic awareness. While it is too early to assess the full scope of impact, the results suggest a promising foundation for long-term change in cultural education in Nordland, provided that such initiatives are institutionalized and supported through formal educational structures.

4.5.3. Potential impacts and implications

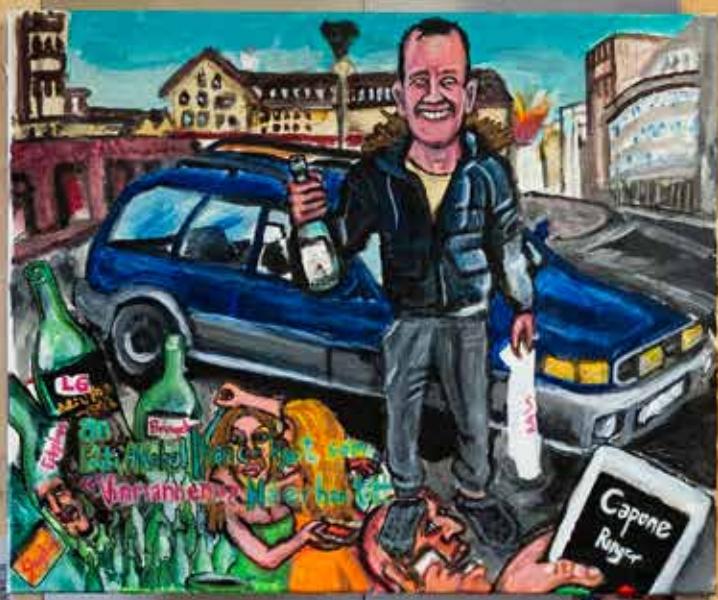
Has Nordland become a best-practice example of cultural democracy? It might be, as several initiatives launched through Bodø2024 ECOC title year demonstrate potential for lasting legacy and can be qualified as best-practice. Frivillig2024 positioned Nordland as an example for inclusive cultural participation, especially through its volunteer networks and collaboration with local civil society associations. The professionalization of volunteerism (e.g., introduction of EU-standard recognition tools) can also be seen as contributions to long-term civic infrastructure contributing to cultural democracy as practice. The Ecological Economics initiative marked a significant step toward integrating democratic themes into education. However, whether these initiatives will ultimately be recognized as best practice at the international level remains to be seen. As Social media report highlights, Bodø2024 ECOC as a mega event has amplified tensions a society already carried. That required efforts to reduce the risk of cultural expressions unintentionally reinforcing stereotypes or social divides. This was a challenging task that Bodø2024 was necessarily fully aware off and prepared.

When it comes to Bodø2024 contributing to European efforts to safeguard freedom of expression, we have evidence that many cultural projects hold strong potential in this regard. Bodø2024 provided platforms for experimental and provocative art, stimulating dialogue on freedom of expression. Projects like Frivillig2024 offered marginalized groups arenas to express their cultural identities, while UNG2024 focused on amplifying youth voices and democratic participation. Bodø2024 attracted global attention to Sámi heritage and Indigenous rights, thereby strengthening democratic discourse and cultural rights. Moreover, the initiative exposed underlying divisions within cultural policy debates, particularly regarding perceived elitism and

geographic inequalities. However, we miss direct links to European-level initiatives or policy frameworks safeguarding freedom of expression.

What about Bodø2024 as creating long-term cultural infrastructure supporting open dialogue and tolerance? Cultural infrastructure can be physical or social, and both are needed. For instance, some lasting cross-sectoral and international partnerships established during Bodø2024 ECOC title year are expected to continue beyond the title year as legacy of Bodø2024 (Program events report). Artists expressed an urgent need for physical spaces to sustain networks and dialogue formed through Bodø2024 ECOC (Artists report). However, the same artists were skeptical about Bodø2024 ECOC's capacity to generate structural change on its own, noting the absence of a comprehensive legacy plan (Artists report). As of today, we don't have indications that cultural infrastructure supporting dialogue and tolerance has been institutionalized post-2024.

Finally, has Bodø2024 ECOC potential to strengthening European identity through shared democratic values? Bodø2024 ECOC helped to reframe Bodø's identity as part of Europe, not just as Norway's distant northern periphery. Artists and volunteers reported stronger European affiliation rather than local, especially among youth (Artists report). Bodø2024 ECOC has also fostered transnational cooperation and cultural exchanges with other ECOCs. Many events and networks promoted shared values of inclusion, sustainability, and civic participation, aligning with European democratic ideals. Peoples' jury report indicates that average score among jurors for having European affiliation has increased most between 2024 and 2025 (from 4.9 to 5.75 on 7-point scale) followed only by slight increase in the local identity (5.47 -> 5.48), with regional and national almost unchanged.



Bodø Art Collective Exhibition | Photo: David Engmo

4.6. Summary

In accordance with the bid book, Bodø2024 ECoC aimed to catalyze cultural, social, and economic transformation in Nordland through five strategic priorities: youth engagement, audience growth, capacity building, urban development, and freedom of expression. The evaluation shows strong short-term achievements but mixed evidence of long-term structural change.

First, in the strategic priority area Children and Young People, Bodø2024 ECOC demonstrated high youth engagement through UNG2024, including 77 projects and program events, and outreach to more than 10,000 participants. It has also strengthened young people's volunteer networks. Projects and program events appear to have improved confidence, skills, and cultural participation among participating youth. However, our findings also suggest that while cultural engagement fosters a sense of belonging, it does not offset structural drivers of outmigration, such as employment and housing. Therefore, cultural initiatives can complement retention strategies only if integrated with broader policies. The legacy of Bodø2024 depends on sustained funding and municipal support.

Second, in the strategic priority area Growing Our Audience, Bodø2024 ECOC achieved strong results with 434 events, 300,000–355,000 participations, more than 4,500 volunteer contributions, and notable inclusion, especially of youth. However, data indicates that 60% of People's Jury members never attended any events. Audience numbers could have been higher with better digital accessibility and clearer communication strategies. There is a risk that audience gains achieved during the title year will be temporary without institutional anchoring and improved outreach.

Third, in the strategic priority area Connections and Capacity, Bodø2024 ECOC mobilized more than 700 partnerships and over 12,000 performer engagements, including around 3,000 international performer engagements. Another notable achievement was that 10% of events received EU co-funding, and the new school subject Ecological Economics was institutionalized. However, challenges included limited outreach beyond Bodø, modest grants, and unclear project selection processes for artists and cultural workers. Bodø2024 ECOC strengthened the cultural ecosystem, but its sustainability depends on how well municipalities integrate these results and continue to provide resources.

Fourth, in the strategic priority area City Development, Bodø2024 ECOC contributed to increased cultural vibrancy and visibility and activated urban spaces. MONITOR2024 economic simulations show a potential NOK 1,24 billion impact over 15 years. However, there is little evidence of formal integration of culture into urban planning, and "smart city" ambitions indicated in the bid book remain aspirational. While cultural programming has symbolic value, structural urban development impacts require stronger alignment with city planning.



BID 2024 | Photo: Jamal Khawaja

Finally, in the strategic priority area Freedom of Expression, Bodø2024 ECOC achieved important results in elevating dialogue on identity, inclusion, and democratic values. However, these efforts also triggered polarized debates that revealed deep social tensions. Debates around freedom of expression revealed deep social tensions within the local community, particularly Sámi representation sparked controversy. It remains to be seen whether the Bodø2024 legacy will lead to institutionalized infrastructure for dialogue and improved European-level recognition for cultural democracy.

Bodø2024 ECOC signaled that Nordland could become a best-practice case for cultural democracy, but long-term impact depends on formalizing legacy structures.

In summary, Bodø2024 ECOC delivered significant cultural activation and symbolic value, fostering civic pride and international visibility. However, enduring transformation hinges on legacy planning, resource continuity, and integration of results with structural policies in employment and urban development.

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5.1. See Me-culture vs. We See-culture

In this section, we present brief summaries of three MONITOR2024 reports: the Students report, the Volunteers report, and the Adolescence report. People's engagement in art and culture may serve a purpose. Based upon the data, we sense that young people in their formative years use art and culture partly differently than do more settled and older people.

For both, engagement in cultural events allows for socializing and bonding with groups of people valuable to the individual. For both groups, participation in cultural events fosters socializing and bonding with people who matter to them. Older people, who have already formed their in-groups of family and friends, use cultural events as an arena for confirming and strengthening their bonds with such groups, or to have a positive or thought-provoking personal experience. Younger people in their formative years are in need of establishing new in-groups of family and friends. Art and cultural events invite such bonding in different ways.

Some art and cultural events allocate a passive spectator role in engagement with the art or cultural event. We label such as We See-culture. Such events might be fine art high-profile events that give the event a prestigious element, promising a memorable engagement, allowing the spectators to create a common history, and strengthening already established bonds. A spectator at a ballet or an opera offered by a prestigious ensemble is invited to engage in the event in a highly prescribed way, be quiet and applaud when cued.

Some art and culture arrangements allow the consumer-visitor to shape their own partaking in the creation of the event. Young people on the brink of adulthood need to create, or be selected into, new in-groups. To be selected, one needs to stand out as a resourceful person, adding value to these new in-groups in forming. Events allowing the individual to shine, stand out and engage with other individuals who attend this for the same purpose, are then in demand. We label art and cultural events that

invite such interactions as See Me-culture. An example of such could be festivals with popular music. The prestige of the bands performing is then attracting the attendees to the event, while the structuring and layout of the event invites the attendees to dress up, engage and partake. Other examples of "See Me-culture" invite the attendees to join as volunteers, as performers, or organizers of such.

Therefore, our findings indicate that there is a difference between See Me-culture and We See-culture. See Me-culture engagement refers to cultural engagement aimed at creating new social bonds and standing out as an individual. It is characterized by active participation in art and cultural events where the person can be visible and express themselves—such as performing, volunteering, or co-creating. This form of engagement is common among younger individuals who seek to establish new in-groups and build confidence in their identity. We See-culture engagement refers to cultural engagement focused on maintaining and reinforcing existing social bonds. It involves shared experiences as spectators—attending concerts, exhibitions, or memorable events together—creating joint stories and memories that strengthen established relationships. This form of engagement is typical among older individuals who already have stable in-groups and use cultural activities to confirm and uphold these connections. Most art and culture events allow for both See Me-culture and We See-culture engagement at the same time, but the balance between them might differ. Sports, for instance, allows for engagements both as actors, fan-club members, and as spectators together with close family and friends.

5.2 Effects of culture on settlement intentions

Several MONITOR2024 scientific reports examine how cultural development—particularly through Bodø2024 ECOC—affects settlement intentions and moving-out tendencies across different population groups (Volunteers report, Adolescence report, Students report).

These three reports focus on upper secondary school pupils and university students. In all three, culture is considered a catalyst for rural and urban development, with Bodø2024 ECOC aiming to make Bodø and Nordland more attractive for settlement by enriching cultural offerings. The underlying logic is that stronger cultural engagement can foster social bonds and a sense of belonging, which in turn may increase willingness to stay in or return to the region.

The reports show that improving cultural supply influences settlement intentions indirectly by enhancing social belonging and creating arenas for interaction. For upper secondary school pupils, job opportunities and secure living conditions remain the dominant factors in decisions to stay or move. However, cultural activities strengthen attachment to place when combined with structural factors such as employment and housing.

For university students, cultural arenas facilitate social group formation, which can reduce moving-out intentions, though preferences vary by gender, age, and family situation. All reports conclude that culture acts as a complementary driver of settlement attractiveness, reinforcing social belonging and quality of life when integrated with structural factors like employment and housing.

The findings underscore that culture should not be viewed as an isolated driver of lasting demographic change, but as a critical component of an integrated regional development strategy. By aligning cultural initiatives with employment, housing, education, and social infrastructure, Bodø2024 ECOC and similar programs can help transform cultural investment into long-term population retention.



Bodø2024 sweater | Photo: Fredrik Stenbro



Helt konge theater performance 2024 | Photo: Airida Bekeryte

5.3. Clusters of cultural consumers and their responses to Bodø2024 ECoC as cultural stimuli

The MONITOR2024 Peoples' Jury report shows that Bodø2024 ECOC acted as a cultural stimulus that illuminated four distinct clusters of cultural consumers within the Peoples' Jury, each with its own way of experiencing and interpreting the year (Peoples' jury report).

These groups, including Community Anchors, Cultural Enthusiasts, Balanced Participants, and Pragmatic Skeptics, followed different emotional and behavioral paths through the cultural program, responding to the same signals with divergent expectations, attachments, and thresholds of satisfaction.

It is important to note that around 60% of the jurors reported no participation in any Bodø2024 program events during the title year, which resulted in low attendance averages across all clusters. The cluster analysis and the naming patterns therefore reflect relative differences in engagement and interpretation rather than absolute levels of cultural consumption.

Community Anchors formed the most cohesive group, combining strong place attachment with lasting optimism about Bodø2024 and local cultural life. Despite attending only slightly more than three events during the ECOC year on average, their evaluations stayed high, showing how symbolic recognition and civic pride can sustain positive views even without active participation. Cultural Enthusiasts started from excitement and curiosity, embracing the idea of the cultural year as an adventure. Their satisfaction rose early but declined as the program matured, revealing how novelty drives engagement for experience-oriented audiences. With attendance averaging one to two Bodø2024 program events during the title year, they remained emotionally involved but required constant renewal to stay invested.

Balanced Participants mirrored the Cultural Enthusiasts in civic pride yet approached the program with more caution. Their early support waned over time as satisfaction with local culture and municipal performance softened. Attendance averaged about one Bodø2024 program event, suggesting that practical factors such as convenience, price, and family routines outweighed the symbolic appeal.

Pragmatic Skeptics diverged sharply from the rest. They doubted the project's value from the beginning, viewing it primarily through economic and political frames. Cultural life satisfaction declined further as the year advanced, and attendance (barely half an event on average) remained minimal. For them, fiscal priorities and trust overshadowed any cultural ambitions.

Across all clusters, a participation paradox persisted. Support or opposition rarely correlated with attendance (Peoples' jury report). Even the most supportive jurors engaged in only a small fraction of the events offered and the share of participants with no attendance at all was high in every cluster. The program's influence thus operated less through direct consumption and more through visibility, prestige, and civic pride. Attachment to Bodø and support for Bodø2024 ECOC also moved along separate tracks. Some residents felt proud of the European title, while planning to move elsewhere; others felt firmly rooted in the city but skeptical of the project's value. Cultural stimuli, therefore, can elevate local mood and identity without necessarily altering intentions to move or everyday engagement patterns.

5.4. Bodø2024 ECOC in social media

Bodø2024 ECOC made the city speak in many voices, as MONITOR2024 reports in the Social Media report. From the first weeks until the closing months, the title year generated continuous and often intense public conversation across local social media platforms.

The opening ceremony became a symbolic reference point that defined much of the following discourse. Many residents expressed pride and emotion, feeling that their city had reached a new level of visibility and recognition. Others voiced disappointment, perceiving exclusion or disconnection from what was presented as a collective celebration. In the online public discourse, culture appeared as a lived, everyday experience, rooted in places, family routines, and memories that give meaning to identity.

Five dominant voices structured online discussions. Critics expressed dissatisfaction directly, linking decisions to weak leadership and mismanagement. The so-called Snark Squad adopted irony and ridicule to convey similar messages in a sharper tone. Defenders sought to correct misinformation and offer procedural explanations, often emphasizing the complexity of governance. Problem-Solvers aimed to transform the debate into constructive dialogue, proposing coordination, factual grounding, and new solutions. Sympathizers focused on empathy and community, highlighting the human consequences behind the controversies. Together, Critics and Snark Squad formed a vocal critical block that largely defined the tone, though they contributed little to actionable progress. Defenders and Problem-Solvers carried most of the constructive input, yet their voices were fewer in numbers and frequently overshadowed by conflict-driven exchanges.

Three conflicts dominated the discussions, each amplified by the scale and visibility of Bodø2024 ECOC. The first concerned representation and belonging: who appeared on stage, whose narratives were highlighted, and whose were omitted. Visibility of Sámi culture and local talent became a focal point. Some interpreted it as a long-awaited inclusion; others saw it as tokenism or political instrumentalization. The second conflict centered on allocation and the legitimacy of spending decisions. Concerns about budgets, symbolic excess, and trade-offs with public services such as education and health often turned artistic debates into questions of trust and governance. The third conflict, linked to cutbacks (e.g. proposed closure of schools, see section 4.1.2), emerged when cultural investments coincided with the reduction of everyday services. Residents connected cultural prioritization to perceived neglect of ordinary needs, which intensified frustration and distrust.

Viewed through the lens of social media, the year unfolded less as a linear celebration and more as a civic negotiation about meaning, fairness, and participation. Understanding the discourse became crucial because it revealed how large-scale cultural projects intersect with local identity, social cohesion, and trust in public institutions. The conversation around Bodø2024 ECOC demonstrates how cultural policy becomes a lived negotiation of values, and how the public voice, even when critical, plays a central role in defining what a cultural project ultimately represents.

5.5. Long-term potential socio-economic effects of Bodø2024 ECOC for Bodø municipality.

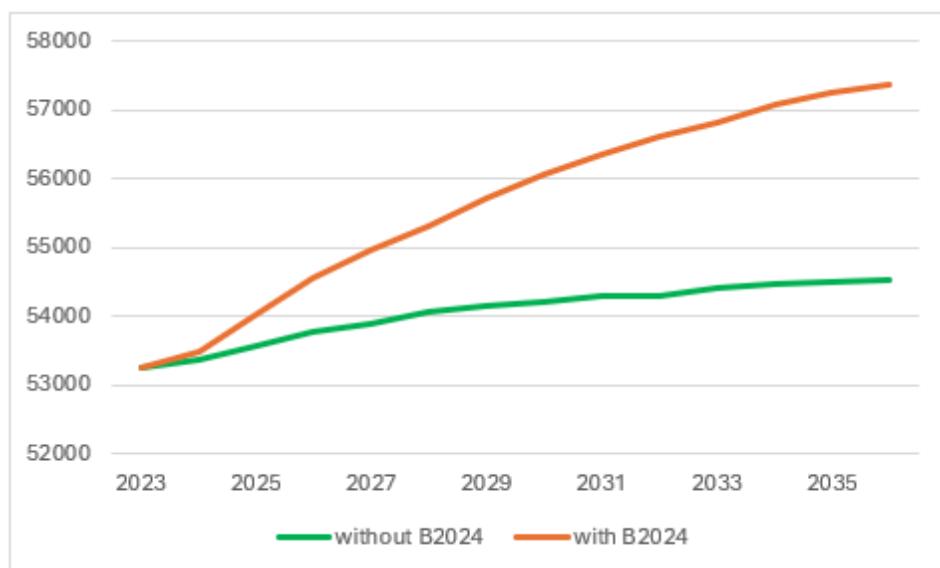
MONITOR2024, with the help of a digital twin of Bodø municipality created by the local company LOS Analytics, evaluated the potential socioeconomic effects of the Bodø2024 title year as a cultural investment for Bodø municipality by 2036. Based on statistical data for 2022 and projected expectations, two scenarios were initially simulated: the “success” scenario (best case, where all Bodø2024 activities proceed as planned at maximum capacity) and the “failure” scenario (worst case, where Bodø2024 fails to attract significant public attention) (Scenario report).

Using updated data collected during 2024, MONITOR2024 conducted a new round of simulations incorporating actual numbers of tourists, cultural events and visitors, and recent demographic statistics. These figures indicate that the actual outcomes of Bodø2024, in many respects, exceeded the “success” scenario.

Figure 3 illustrates potential differences in population development under two new scenarios: Bodø “with” and “without Bodø2024” (as if Bodø2024 had never taken place).

The simulations suggest that 2,836 more individuals can be living in Bodø by 2036 because of holding Bodø2024 ECOC title year. It is projected to generate direct spending, increased turnover in tourism-related industries, indirect and induced sales growth, a larger available workforce, and consumption effects linked to population growth. These factors are expected to raise the operating income of organizations and firms in Bodø. Overall, Bodø2024 ECOC could generate an additional NOK 1 billion over the 13-year period, averaging NOK 80 million per year, with the cultural sector alone increasing turnover by NOK 360 million. However, this development assumes that Bodø2024 legacy is maintained.

Figure 3. Potential Population Development due to Bodø2024 ECOC (Source: Updated scenario report).



6 . C O N C L U - S I O N S A N D I M P L I C A - T I O N S

6.1. Overall assessments

Bodø2024 was the first European Capital of Culture located north of the Arctic Circle, aiming to use culture as a catalyst for regional development, civic engagement, and international visibility. The initiative was structured around five strategic priorities: youth engagement, audience growth, capacity building, urban development, and freedom of expression.

Our assessment is that Bodø2024 ECOC contributed significantly to cultural activation, youth empowerment, capacity building, and enhancing the visibility and pride of Bodø and Nordland. The mega-event delivered short-term cultural gains, fostering civic pride and international visibility. It marked an important cultural milestone for Northern Norway, demonstrating that the region can host large-scale cultural events with European relevance. Furthermore, it succeeded in institutionalizing volunteer networks, youth programs, and cultural education initiatives.

However, several key challenges should also be noted. Debates around freedom of expression revealed deep social tensions within the local community, particularly where Sámi representation sparked controversy. While cultural engagement was acknowledged as an important

factor in reducing outmigration, it cannot offset the primary drivers of this trend, which require integrating cultural policy with employment, housing, and urban development strategies. There was limited integration of culture into formal urban planning, along with weaknesses in public outreach and event information dissemination, which constrained audience potential. The sustainability of many cultural initiatives launched during the title year will require stronger institutional anchoring and continued municipal support and funding.

Bodø2024 ECOC acted as a cultural catalyst of regional change. However, the ability of Bodø2024 ECOC to act as a true “game changer” for demographic and structural challenges in Northern Norway depends on sustained political will, adequate funding, and strategic alignment beyond the title year of 2024.

6.2. Recommendations and implications

6.2.1. Recommendations for Local and Regional Policymakers

Recommendation 1. Integrate cultural and rural/urban economic development strategies with a focus on young people.

Future cultural initiatives should be closely linked to job creation and capacity building for the youth. This includes creating cultural hubs and arenas that also serve as co-working and innovative spaces for young people. Our findings suggest that investment in culture has the potential to contribute to youth retention if accompanied by complementary policies addressing structural needs. By combining cultural vitality and empowerment with employment opportunities, housing, and social infrastructure, Nordland and Bodø can move closer to reversing its demographic decline and securing a sustainable future for the region.

Potential mechanisms: For youths to thrive and settle in the municipality or the region, there is a need to enhance informal meeting places by building cultural spaces, arenas and regular events. This can build upon Nordland's strong identification with nature and outdoor life with cultural initiatives, e.g., by developing hybrid venues combining culture, sports, and leisure. The purpose is to enhance social meeting places where the youths can build self-esteem through culture. This is where the youth could stand up, build confidence, shine,

be visible as a capable actor and succeed, in terms of being regarded as important and valued by their peers. Move beyond consumption-oriented cultural policies (ie. 'We See-culture events') to include active participation and co-creation by youth (ie. See Me-culture events). This needs capacity building and training programs, youth-led cultural projects, and mentorship that can increase engagement and to foster youths' long-term engagement.

Recommendation 2. Support professional networks of artists and cultural workers through infrastructure development.

Many artists wish to build on the professional networks they developed during Bodø2024 ECOC title year, but experience challenges in securing support for their activities.

Potential mechanisms: We recommend establishing art and culture all-houses that facilitate meetings and collaborative artistic and cultural production, that can include various ateliers, short-term guest housing, and café's that invite public interaction with artists and cultural workers. Stronger connections between public/



Arctic light opening | Photo: David Engmo

private sectors and cultural actors should be facilitated. We recommend continuing education and training initiated during Bodø2024 ECOC, with a focus on how to apply for funding, seek sponsorships, and project management, e.g. estimating project budget, manage production nuances, build national and international networks and attract audiences.

Recommendation 3. Maintain and strategically expand engagement of the cultural volunteers.

Because artists and cultural workers frequently express a need for more support, strengthening their collaboration with volunteers is an important way around resource constraints. Our findings suggest that the volunteers would like to attend more art and cultural events than they currently enjoy. Volunteering, therefore,

is an important resource that can be activated to a much higher degree. Local municipalities are well-positioned to take an active role in facilitating this highly beneficial collaboration.

Potential mechanisms: Because it is easier to recruit volunteers that have previously acted as volunteers, keep track of them. Allow them to volunteer regularly, as the volunteers would like to re-engage. When recruiting, highlight benefits and emphasize opportunities for skill-building, recognition, and enjoyment. Youth volunteering can be a central strategy because it can give young people opportunities to participate in cultural projects and build capacities, fostering a sense of belonging and ownership, strengthening their local engagement. Young volunteers can be recruited at arenas where they are, e.g. schools and youth clubs. To have an appeal among young people, volunteering should be rebranded as "cultural crew".

6.2.2. Implications and Lessons Learned for Future ECOC Programs

Implication 1. Embed cultural development in regional and urban development strategies.

Although each ECOC title year has different stated strategic priorities and goals, we recommend ensuring that these goals align with the needs of the stakeholders the ECOC concept intends to serve – strongly confirming and even going beyond the recommendations for ECOC-candidate cities. In most cases, this means not only to align the ECOC-project with the overall cultural strategy but also integrating cultural initiatives with strategies related to social, economic, regional and urban development. Our findings demonstrate that while cultural investment is essential for improving place attractiveness, it cannot substitute for structural strategies addressing e.g. housing, education, employment and job creation. Future art and culture programs should be explicitly embedded within broader regional development plans.

Implication 2. Plan early for ECOC sustainability and legacy.

The ECOC year should not be viewed as a one-year event but as a catalyst for long-term cultural, social, and economic transformation. Therefore, planning mechanisms to maintain momentum after the ECOC year are crucial. There must be a clear definition of how cultural investments will endure beyond the title year. Because long-term benefits are strongest among those already culturally engaged, arts education, school programs, and community partnerships should be embedded into the program to sustain impact. We recommend that legacy planning and local success indicators are given even more priority in the bid book.

Implication 3. Use data-driven methods for impact measurement and evidence-based governance.

Evaluation and monitoring of ECOC activities should not be treated as a mere legitimacy exercise and post-factum reporting. Employing data-driven evaluation methods—such as multivariate techniques including correlation and regression analysis—can help policymakers track the impact of cultural initiatives on demographic trends, refine interventions, and enable stronger evidence-based governance. Research can identify the most effective policies to achieve more with fewer resources. We therefore recommend that future ECOCs collaborate even closer with evaluators to plan and structure data collection in advance. Where possible, access to multiple databases should be ensured to enable data triangulation.

Implication 4. Ensure transparent governance of ECOC programs.

Our findings show that clear communication of funding priorities is essential to avoid perceptions of elitism or fiscal opacity. The success of a cultural mega-event does not depend on public agreement about every artistic or financial choice, but on whether residents understand why these choices were made and how they relate to broader civic aims. Transparency in resource allocation can ensure that support for major institutions and smaller, volunteer-driven initiatives is perceived as fair. This also includes transparent communication about expected costs and benefits of ECOC events—such as economic and social returns (e.g. job creation, tourism, improved school programs)—and their links to tangible improvements (e.g., infrastructure, education). Without transparent governance and authentic cultural



Reinspikka Hip Hop concert | Photo: David Engmo

integration, controversies about misuse of funding, misrepresentation, and lack of inclusivity may arise. Our findings show that support and skepticism toward ECOC coexists in space and time, meaning that practical barriers must be addressed and tangible benefits clearly communicated. This is because meaning-making around large cultural projects is not only about what is done, but about how it is explained, with whom, and through which channels. We recommend investing in user-friendly digital ECOC platforms and proactive outreach via e.g. social media and SMS alerts.

Implication 5. Balance diverse cultural preferences.

Our evaluation shows that different population groups have distinct cultural preferences, which should be addressed through varied artistic and cultural engagements. Civic pride and European visibility of the ECOC title year can outweigh direct participation, with many residents appreciating cultural availability without attending ECOC events.

MONITOR2024 evaluation has identified four audience segments that acted differently in relation to Bodø2024.

While community anchors thrived on local pride and inclusive events, cultural enthusiasts were seeking novelty and quality throughout the year. While balanced participants required practical relevance and family-friendly formats, pragmatic skeptics demanded visible, everyday benefits. Therefore, audience segmentation should occur early, and programming should be tailored accordingly, combining high-profile events with grassroots initiatives to ensure local resonance. ECOC program events should be scheduled at varied times and formats (e.g. shorter, family-friendly, local venues) and include popular and traditional formats alongside high-art events.

Implication 6. Comparative evaluations of ECOCs are highly beneficial.

Evaluations include some comparisons between ECoCs, both between cities and overtime. They are all different, but some common elements (KPIs) should be relevant. It will allow to learn from previous ECOCs, e.g. ECOCs cities during the title year can establish evaluation cooperation.

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The front and back covers of this report feature a collage of handwork created by the MONITOR2024 research group and members of the reference group during a visit to Fleinvær island (<https://theartchideaway.com>) in September 2024. The residency on the island supported the reference group in advancing assessment and evaluation work and in gaining a deeper understanding of the data, as well as the Arctic context. During their stay at the Arctic Hideaway for a reference group meeting, members of Monitor2024 and the international group visualized their experiences with the assistance of visual artist Are Andreassen in his atelier.

Appendix: Monitor2024 reports - An overview

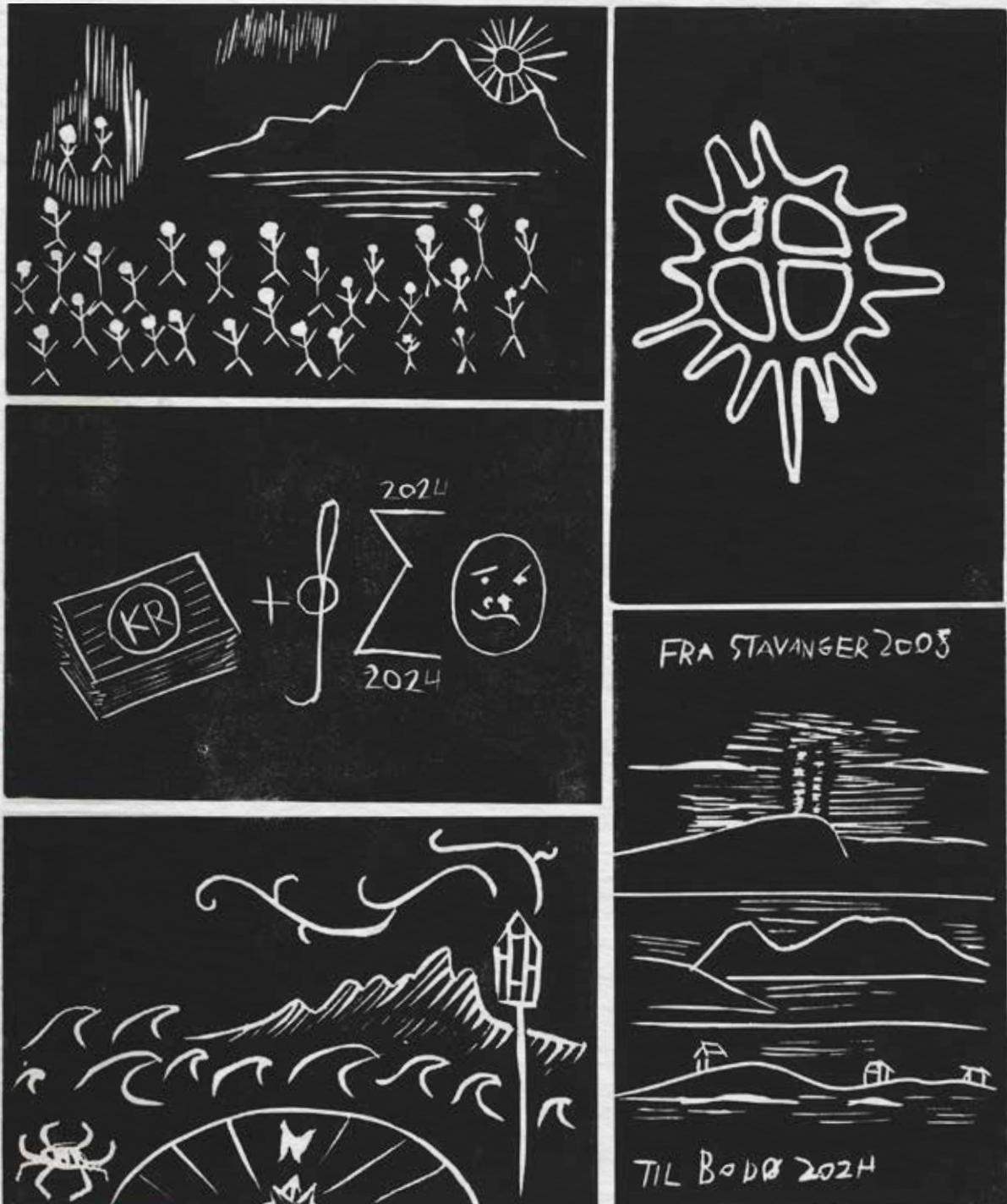
Report title	Report focus	Reference code
<u>Baseline Report - Monitor 2024: Effects of Bodø as European Capital of Culture 2024</u>	Presenting a detailed overview of the basic economy in the county of Nordland as well as the cultural dynamics within the region before Bodø2024	Baseline report
<u>Inception Report - Conceptual Foundation for the Evaluation and Monitoring of Bodø 2024: Project Monitor 2024</u>	Conceptual foundations for the monitoring and evaluation of Bodø 2024	Inception report
<u>Bodø2024: Simulating Best-case and Worst-case Scenarios</u>	Simulation of Bodø2024 effects with agent-base modelling. Presenting two scenarios for Bodø2024 and its potential impacts	Scenario report
<u>Understanding the Narrative of "Bodø 2024": An AI-assisted Analysis of the Discourse in Norwegian Media (2023-2025)</u>	Presenting how Bodø2024 was covered in media, examining dominant topics and main themes that citizens and broader communities are concerned with and discussing the associated sentiments with AI-driven tools for data analysis	Press media report
<u>ECOC Bodø2024: Should I stay, or should I go? - Settlement Intentions Among Adolescents in Nordland</u>	This report investigates whether and how art and culture in general and the ECOC Bodø2024 megaevent in particular, affect upper secondary school pupils' desire to stay or come back to their hometown or the region as adults after graduation	Adolescence report
<u>Bodø2024: Understanding Impacts Through Program Events</u>	Presenting an overview of cultural events announced in the official program for Bodø2024 with the aim to evaluate the program events' contribution to the objectives of Bodø2024 and European Commission	Program events report
<u>ECOC Bodø2024: Cultural Projects as Pathways to Legacy</u>	Investigating cultural projects under Bodø2024 with the aim to understand what role ECOC cultural projects play in long-term structural change	Projects report

Report title	Report focus	Reference code
<u>ECOC Bodø2024: Individual and Organisational Perspectives on Volunteering</u>	This report investigates if and how art and culture engage volunteers and how the ECOC Bodø2024 offers opportunities for to build bonds with other citizens	Volunteers report
<u>ECOC Bodø2024: Artists and cultural workers expectations and experiences</u>	Artists' perceptions of the improvement of cultural infrastructure as a result of Bodø2024's initiatives	Artists report
<u>ECOC Bodø2024: Students settlement intentions and their use of art and culture</u>	Students' intention to stay in their home-municipalities as adults and how their engagement with art and culture influences this choice	Students report
<u>Bodø2024 through the voices of the Peoples Jury</u>	Perception of Bodø2024 from People's Jury - example of involving residents in evaluating a cultural mega-event	Peoples' jury report
<u>When a City Speaks Online: Citizen Discourse on the Bodø2024 Year</u>	The study seeks to understand how the Bodø2024 European Capital of Culture year has been received by residents of Bodø when they communicate in their own digital spaces.	Social media report
<u>Tracking Change: The Cultural and Economic Impact of Bodø2024</u>	Updating the situation in Nordland region after Bodø2024 to be able to reflect upon changes that Bodø2024 brought to the region	Updated Baseline report
<u>Updated Simulation of Potential Effects of Bodø 2024 European Capital of Culture for development of Bodø municipality by 2036</u>	Updating the former Simulation report with new data after Bodø2024	Updated scenario report





The Orchestra Year 2024 | Photo: David Engmo



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