9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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MODERATORS

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The 17 Rooms initiative is convened by the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation to stimulate near-term cooperative actions to advance the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This document summarizes insights and actions that emerged from the working group discussions in Room 9 during the 17 Rooms 2020 flagship process. The text was independently prepared by the Room's Moderators and participants, in response to the common question asked of all Rooms in 2020: "In light of recent crises linked to COVID-19, systemic racism, and other urgent challenges, what are 1 to 3 actionable priorities over the coming 12-18 months that address near term needs while also making a decisive contribution to protecting or advancing your Goal's 2030 results? What actions can members of your Room take to advance these priorities?" Corresponding documents prepared by all the other Rooms are available here, alongside a synthesis report prepared by the 17 Rooms secretariat.

SDG 9 calls for building resilient infrastructure, promoting sustainable industrialization, and fostering innovation. It is important not only in its own right, but for making progress on every other SDG.

The 2020 edition of Room 9 focused on an idea raised in last year's 17 Rooms: digital public infrastructure, also referred to as digital public goods or platforms. These are base functions like digital identity, digital payments, or online civil and vital registries that allow governments, businesses, and individuals to carry out basic transactions with each other. Above this core lies a broader set of digital solutions for specific sectors, such as platforms for on-line learning or for managing healthcare data. Underpinning all of these are rules about who has access to what data passing through these platforms, creating a framework for privacy, competition, and transparency. Room 9 noted that it is worth advancing all of these elements of digital infrastructure, even if they require different tactics and timelines.

Room 9 confirmed the idea that digital public infrastructure can advance SDG 9 and the other SDGs. For example, it could allow a government to shift from fuel subsidies to direct cash transfers to poor households—a change that promises both anti-poverty and environmental benefits.

The number and importance of such use cases have only grown as the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the digitization of commerce, education, and government. This has created a gap between those with access to digital infrastructure and those without. Those countries that have world-class digital infrastructure have weathered the pandemic better than those without. The aggressive use of "data exhaust" from digital transactions to monitor disease spread and compliance with shutdowns highlights the crucial need to balance public good and private protections in data use.

Last year's Room 9 mooted the idea of an anchor organization to promote digital public infrastructure globally. This year's group argued that the idea had become actionable this year, with a UN High Level Panel calling for digital public goods and various efforts underway to make this reality (e.g., cadpi.io, digitalpublicgoods.net, societalplatform.org). An agenda for such an organization could include:

- **Demonstrate the value** of digital public infrastructure and the strengths of open tools to national governments and developers.
- **Align a community of supporters** around open software, standards, and systems that can potentially be implemented anywhere in the world, while making sure they are compatible with existing local systems.
- **Cultivate a local developer community** by ensuring that every local tech player can be a part of the innovation by building new tools on top of globally provided tools.
- **Build capacity and confidence of governments** to understand and build digital infrastructure. Outdated procurement practices and lack of experiences are a blockage, but strategies like embedding tech talent in government work.
- **Promote balanced policies on access and use of data**, especially by supporting local advocates, making data reasonably open to local businesses, governments and organizations, creating safeguards against surveillance (especially by government), and ensuring that individuals are empowered to access, control, and use data about them.

Participants identified steps to take in the next year to advance this vision, especially:
- Assemble a broader set of supporters and asking them for a commitment to support digital public infrastructure. These could focus on both broadly useful applications (e.g., identity, payments) and those for specific sectors (e.g. electronic health records, contact tracing).
- Support one country or regional example to do a full implementation, running from basic data policy to digital identity to applications in healthcare or education, demonstrating the value to others.
- Use the COVID-19 crisis to demonstrate what a coordinated push on digital public goods looks like, by articulating standards for data collection and use and supporting common platforms for managing testing, tracing, and vaccination data.