The Brookings Institution
Center for Sustainable Development
and
The Rockefeller Foundation

17 Rooms Podcast
"Getting the world unstuck on the Sustainable Development Goals"
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Episode Summary:

"The world feels pretty stuck in taking on its biggest issues—things like poverty, climate change, inequality," says Brookings Senior Fellow John McArthur in this debut episode of "17 Rooms," a podcast about actions, insights, and community for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the people driving them. In this new podcast, McArthur—who directs the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings, and co-host Zia Khan—senior vice president for innovation at The Rockefeller Foundation, talk with thought leaders and practitioners who are pushing to make change across all 17 of the SDGs as part of the 17 Rooms initiative, where people from diverse backgrounds meet in their own "Rooms," one for each of the SDGs, to identify concrete actions they can take over the next 12-18 months toward the Goals.

In this episode, Khan and McArthur preview the show, discuss the 17 Rooms process, and introduce themselves, explaining why they are excited about this work.

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MCARTHUR: Hi, I'm John MacArthur, senior fellow and director of the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution.

KHAN: And I'm Zia Khan, senior vice president for innovation at The Rockefeller Foundation. This is 17 Rooms, a podcast about actions, insights and community for the Sustainable Development Goals and the people driving them.

MCARTHUR: Actions, insights, communities, Sustainable Development Goals. Zia, it is a mouthful. What does it all mean? Well, in the simplest sense, the world feels pretty stuck in taking on its biggest issues things like poverty, climate change, inequality. These are the issues that are embedded in the world's Sustainable Development Goals. In 17 Rooms, we're aiming to foster actions to help the world get unstuck. We're looking for things that are big enough to make a difference and small enough to get done. We did recently release a bunch of amazing reports from this year's 17 Rooms flagship. Zia, what do you make of those documents?

KHAN: John, I love those reports. They're full of great ideas, great analyses, and great action plans. But as you and I talked about, they were missing something. They were missing the voices that made it all happen.

MCARTHUR: And that's what we're going to do here in this podcast. We're going to make it personal. All these big problems in the world, they come down to people. People who are pushing to make change, to make things better, to bring people together around change. What types of people? So many types! From a Harvard professor, to an African minister for digital transformation, to an Indian education entrepreneur, and a former White House chief of staff.

The reality is, and Zia I think you and I both know this, it can be hard to make change, especially on big issues. It can be frustrating, agonizing, exhausting. And, I think we have to be honest—it can be lonely too. So, we're going to go behind the scenes in this podcast series to talk with people who are driving change. To learn more about how they think about the Sustainable Development Goals, how they think about specific opportunities for change, and how they actually go about bringing people together to drive change.

KHAN: And in the next 17 episodes, we're going to hear from a few dozen just extraordinary thought leaders and practitioners who are doing extraordinary things on each of the 17 different Goals. There will be one episode per Sustainable Development Goal. And our guests are going to be working on issues as diverse as how to get cash to the poorest people in the world, how to protect nature, how to eliminate modern slavery, and how to bridge communities of faith to advance gender equality, as just a few examples.

So, John, all of these extraordinary people are coming together under the 17 rooms process. Let's take a step back and use this episode to explain to our listeners what 17 Rooms is and why it exists.

MCARTHUR: These goals were agreed by all 193 countries at the United Nations way back in 2015, if we can remember back that far, and they're focused on a 2030 time horizon. They're the product, it has to be said, of an incredibly intensive process that brought all governments together from around the world in the most inclusive global agenda-setting

process the world's ever seen, over the matter of a couple of years, to figure out a common agenda. They tackle specific problems like hunger, education, health, jobs, climate, the oceans, and even peace and justice.

But one of the funny things about these goals, in my view, at least, is that they're often discussed in the wrong way. They're often described as something that the U.N. has agreed on and then told the world to care about. But what I've come up with and my best take is that they're actually about what the world has told the U.N. not to forget about. These are the issues that the *world* cares about.

So how's the world doing on these goals? Well, Zia, the bottom line is it's not so great. We're stuck on a lot of fronts and moving backward on some, too. And a lot of the official institutions in the world are struggling to make a difference. That's where 17 Rooms comes in, of course, that's what you and I and our teams have been working on, is convening 17 working groups, one per SDG, and asking them to focus on an area within an SDG that is ripe for action. Things that are big enough to make a difference, I think you coined this phrase, but small enough to get done. Zia, how do you see this "stuckness" in the world?

KHAN: John, it's just really frustrating, frankly, to folks like us and the folks that we work with in 17 Rooms. We know we have to make progress. We're spending a lot of time in meetings and processes, but we're just not seeing the advancement and the progress we really need. And I think there's a lot of reasons for it. Some of the things that I see, for example: big global processes, they are filled with problem analysis and debate, but when solutions emerge, people get swamped with what we've called "whataboutism." Well, what about X or what about Y? Or what about Z? And we don't focus on what could be an imperfect solution that we could take forward.

And when these solutions do come up, they often stall out at interesting stories and pilots, but they don't match the scale of the problem and they don't move at the speed that we need. And we hear from everyone about collaboration, and everyone wants to collaborate, but no one really knows how to do it well. We know we can't make progress on the SDGs without governments and companies and communities all working together. But no one knows how to do that. And people struggle with how to partner with people from different institutions, how to align their different goals, their processes don't quite mesh up, and even their institutional cultures and language get in the way for them working together to come up with something that truly integrates the best of what they can bring to the table and drive something forward.

And I'm guessing that these challenges sound familiar to listeners. And John, I think we've landed on a pretty exciting answer in 17 Rooms. What do you think makes 17 Rooms work?

MCARTHUR: Well, Zia, I think we're working on an answer. We're working on a set of answers, and that's maybe a first thing to share with our listeners is, these are big, hard, sticky problems in the world and we're giving it a go to figure out how to take some steps forward. And what does that mean? Well, it's really about taking these goals, these big, lofty, ambitious goals and boiling them down to their essence; to people in Rooms thinking about how to cooperate and map out some next steps. And yes, we literally bring people together into rooms, or over the past couple of years Zooms, one per Goal, and ask the people in those Rooms to identify a component of their Goal that's ripe for action.

We make a real effort to get a diverse cross-section of people together in each Room, and as we mentioned earlier, we asked them to identify actions that are big enough to make a difference, but small enough to get done. And it might be counterintuitive to a lot of people. But we encourage them to take on these huge issues by focusing on super-targeted actions. I think it's one of my favorite phrases here that we've come up with, Zia, is encouraging people to pick a swim lane within a swim lane.

KHAN: And John, each Room works really hard, and there's a lot of activity, and I always ask myself, why do we do all 17 at once?

MCARTHUR: I think we're often asking ourselves that question when we're going from the 14th to the 15th to the 16th to the 17th. And, wouldn't our life be a lot easier if there were just three rooms? Well, the reason is that these 17 Goals, each of them is crucial to the world's future, so we can't just say we're not going to focus on the oceans for the next 10 years, we can't just say we're not going to focus on inequality, we're not going to focus on health, we're not going to focus on education. Each of them is essential.

But crucially, each of them typically has its own place to meet, and they don't have a place to all meet together and to talk about their issues with each other and to actually answer the same question, which is what do we do next? What do we do next year? And so that notion of all the Goals having equal seat at the table is, I think, a crucial aspect of 17 Rooms.

We've identified a couple other design principles, too, thanks to our team's great work in figuring out how to bottle this intuition. One piece of the puzzle is conversations not presentations. We ask people to leave institutional agendas at the door. Come to listen, not to talk. And it's by that listening that we can develop understanding to cooperate and do the next thing, which is take a next step rather than a perfect step.

KHAN: And while 17 Rooms started as a single event, as John, our teams have been innovating away, there's other things that are in place. We certainly have this global flagship process that drives these 17 Rooms, but we also have introduced 17 Rooms X for different communities like universities, or companies, or even cities that want to run their own 17 Rooms process. And that's a really exciting development for how we can expand this and reach more people.

MCARTHUR: I think one of the most gratifying elements of this process, Zia, is to see how different types of communities want to take on 17 Rooms methods to help make the goals their own. It's the opposite of thinking you have to go to the U.N., or you got to talk about big big picture in order to make progress, because what these goals come down to is people in their own communities figuring out how to get together and take on the next step.

Now our flagship process, the stuff that you'll see on our website at 17 Rooms, is really focused on this annual process that now runs over a few months every year. And people who want to learn more about the methods and this year's outcomes from the 2021 process can go to "Brookings dot edu slash 17 rooms."

But the bigger question here, and I think, Zia, you are one of the most amazing people in the world to have this conversation is, what's the innovation? What is this thing, 17 Rooms, and why do you spend time on this? You could spend your time on a lot of things, and you are the

head of innovation for one of the world's major philanthropies. What motivates you to take this on?

KHAN: Well, John, aside from the benefit of working with you and our teams and the amazing community of 17 Rooms, the most important thing to me is this is a group of people who are solving problems that matter and that will help people. And that's actually been a bit of a through line for me.

When I was in college, I remember studying engineering and having a professor tell me that the best way to really get good at engineering is to always make sure that you're working on one really hard problem, one special project, or taking that one really hard class. And I think that's what drew me into fluid dynamics, which I studied, and graduated and got my Ph.D. in, which certainly has no shortage of hard problems but a little lonely working in the lab. And I wasn't totally convinced that these nuanced, fluid dynamics problems would really matter.

And then I jumped into management consulting where you work on hard problems for different companies and you help them and they matter, but they matter mostly to making profits and solving operational problems and things like that.

And I did a little bit of pro bono work later in my career as a consultant for a charter school. It was a small school, and they were just trying to figure out how to organize a little bit better. But it made such an impact on me to see kids and teachers just being more effective with some of the tools that I thought I had learned around problem-solving, both from engineering and also consulting.

And that led me to The Rockefeller Foundation, which is an amazing institution, has a long, storied background of solving big problems at scale. And I got really fired up about the opportunity to introduce some innovation techniques and strategy techniques to the challenges we were trying to help everyone with, ranging from public health to agriculture to economic opportunity, and they meshed very naturally with the SDGs.

But I saw how much people struggled with these complex issues to get traction. And then when you reached out to me to talk about 17 Rooms, I thought, Well, this is an amazing opportunity to get a great community of people, to work with them, to constantly innovate in how we're solving problems, to draw from the best of different disciplines, and really make a difference and try and make progress year by year on these long journeys we know we need to take to 2030, but where we have to make progress month by month, week by week, and even day by day. And so that's what's been really fun for me. How about you?

MCARTHUR: Well, can I ask another question first, Zia? Just curious. How do you describe your SDG journey in that personal journey? Because they seem to have merged a little bit, but maybe not in a way that any of us would have expected, like five years ago.

KHAN: Well, John, I have to admit, when I first heard about the SDGs, I was a little skeptical. It felt like another global process, putting another global set of aspirations that just would be out of reach for anyone to try and make progress on. And I felt they were really broad, and I just didn't understand how they could be helpful.

But I've really changed my mind. I've come to see them as they are frames to help bring different actors who are actually working on pretty similar things but help them work

together. And that has been a very powerful forcing function, I think, for collaboration where people, different people in different parts of the world with different capabilities, have common goals. And so I see them as a fantastic device to help spark innovation and make progress.

MCARTHUR: It's interesting because I maybe should confess, I was initially pretty skeptical of the SDGs, too, but for a totally different reason. Which was that I came at them, to answer your question, from the backdrop of the MDGs, or the Millennium Development Goals. And I came of age professionally in the early 2000s, where the big crisis that was motivating me was the global health crisis and especially HIV/AIDS, which at the turn of the millennium was unaddressed. Millions of people dying every year. Most of them in Africa because they were too poor to afford a pill. And the world was doing absolutely nothing to solve it.

And I had a front row seat early in my career, totally by happenstance, to how even a big, impossible, too hard to try a problem like that can get solved. And we now have, it's getting closer to 30 million people on AIDS treatment around the world thanks to the magic of anti-retrovirals, but also thanks to massive new institutions that were set up, creative institutions, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, Malaria, the U.S. initiative, breakthroughs in science, breakthroughs in financing, and all these things. And it gave me the presumption from the first step that big problems could get solved.

But then when the SDGs came along, I was one of these people who was focused on extreme poverty and poorest of the poor. And then it's like, oh my gosh, too many issues, can't these people decide? And it was only in actually talking with a lot of people around the world who said, ah! the thing I care about is in there, I love these goals, that I realized that the SDGs are actually the world's best umbrella for bringing together all the things that each constituency around the world already considers most important. And then I realized I'd spent all these years having these arguments with people over why is my issue not in the MDGs? Why don't you care about my part of the world that isn't quite so poor but still has poverty? Or why don't you care about inequality in, you know, North America? Or why don't you care about innovation that's going to drive our new job agenda or whatever?

And I do remember someone going up, coming up to me and saying, Well, what are you doing for the oceans? And I felt like it was pretty lame that I didn't have an answer for 70 percent of the planet on what I was trying to do. And so, I realized these SDGs are this extraordinary way to crystallize, imperfectly, but crystallize all these different agendas to get everyone on the same page, literally and figuratively.

And then it was because I'd been in all these institutional processes over different times that I realized, gosh, we need a different way to get people together to celebrate the fact that these are diverse people who each have their own way to problem solve. But we don't ever figure out how to bring them into the same conference center and have breakout sessions on each of their own issues and then bring them back together in plenary with a lot of coffee breaks in between.

And that led to a conversation with our mutual friend and former colleague, Matthew Bishop on, I was describing this idea to him and he said, Oh, 17 rooms, why don't we call it 17 rooms? I said that's a great idea. He said we could do that, couldn't we? And we agreed to do it together and here we are a few years later with 17 Rooms as this fast shifting, fast evolving

approach to get diverse people together to solve big problems. So it's kind of fun to think about how far it's come in just a few years, even if we still have a long ways to go.

KHAN: Well, you know, John, this has just been super energizing for me, 17 Rooms overall, working with you and your team and everything that you and the Brookings Institution, such a leading research institution and think tank, bring to the table. And to get on the bus from the back of the bus to the middle of the bus to join you right in front in the driver's seat has been a really fun journey. And as I mentioned, I went from SDG skeptic to a very strong SDG advocate in that journey.

MCARTHUR: I think that's one of the reasons why this is going to be so fun to dive in in this series, Zia, because a lot of people out there are probably skeptics, even listeners who are dialing into 17 Rooms. And we know there are a lot of people, of course, who haven't even heard of the SDGs, say what the heck does that stand for? But there's a lot of people who might be curious. There's a lot of people who might be listening to these sustainability debates. There are a lot of people might hear acronyms like ESG—environment, social, and governance when talking about the private sector. And there's a lot of people who just hear about these issues but kind of want to learn a little bit more but want to help understand what can be done.

And that's why I'm excited about this podcast. We're bringing to an end here the first episode of the 17 Rooms podcast. But the real magic is coming up. Episode two is going to bring together the co-moderators of this year's Room 17 for SDG 17. This will be the first of our Room interviews. And SDG 17 focuses on partnerships.

Well, this is a pretty incredible partnership that's come together, co-moderated by Kristen Leanderson Abrams, who's the senior director for combating human trafficking at the McCain Institute, and Carsten Stendevad, who's the co-chief investment officer for sustainability at Bridgewater Associates, the hedge fund. They're going to be talking about their efforts working together to tackle modern slavery and forced labor and removing it from supply chains with new metrics that can help investors know what to avoid. It's a remarkable story of partnership for tackling another Goal, SDG 8, focused on employment and labor. We're looking forward to diving in next time. See you soon! I'm John MacArthur.

KHAN: And I'm Zia Khan, and this has been 17 Rooms. 17 Rooms is produced by the Brookings Podcast Network. You can download and listen to it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts. Episodes will be aired each Tuesday and Thursday through the end of January. Visit "Brookings Dot Edu Slash 17 Rooms podcast" to learn more.

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