



**The Brookings Institution
Center for Sustainable Development**

and

The Rockefeller Foundation

**17 Rooms Podcast
“Reducing inequality has no easy answers”
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Episode Summary:

In this fourteenth interview of the “17 Rooms” podcast, Martín Abregú and Elizabeth Sidiropoulos discuss tackling issues of vaccine equity by updating conceptions of public goods. Abregú, vice president for International Programs at the Ford Foundation, and Sidiropoulos, CEO at the South African Institute of International Affairs, moderated Room 10 focused on Sustainable Development Goal number 10—on reducing inequalities—during the 2021 17 Rooms flagship process.

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

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: Zia, today we are taking on a big, complex, hairy beast of a problem: inequality. And inequality is tricky in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals because it's something we all know, so many people would agree, needs to be addressed, needs to be reduced, and that it is getting worse. At the same time, inequality is a big, complex issue with a lot of interpretations, a lot of definitions, and there's no technical answer or political answer to what's exactly the right amount of equality and inequality in so many dimensions of the human experience. So it actually makes for a tough problem, especially in an era like today where the world is feeling so many tensions and debates around inequality is a massive, massive issue.

KHAN: And, John, I think the recent years of COVID have exposed inequality in so many new ways, and it's put it on the agenda of people who haven't been thinking about it so much. So now we have a broader community of people, including probably most of our listeners, who really would rank and think about inequality as something that we need to tackle. But as you pointed out, it's hard to tackle and it's easy to jump to one off solutions. So how do we balance this tension between a really complex problem but trying to get started somewhere?

And that's where I think this Room took an interesting approach, one that we call the campfire, where you pull together really diverse perspectives and just invest the time to talk about the problem, see where there's common ground, look at the different angles. And they landed in a very interesting place around, first of all, focusing on vaccine equity as the near-term pressing problem that we have to address, but can also be a step towards broader inequality challenges and then thinking about what are the issues we should really focus on.

MCARTHUR: And I think it's interesting how they frame the vaccine equity challenge globally as a great reveal of the underlying tensions that got us to this place that the world needs to vaccinate itself globally in order to be successful in any part of the world locally. And there are a few tensions that I think come up in this type of conversation. So for our listeners, you might want to look out for, first, this tension between how do we tackle that local aspect of inequality at the same time as we tackle it globally? Where's the balance of power? Where's the balance of action and fulcrum for change?

A second is what's the tension between self-interest of people wanting to protect themselves, either in their jobs or in their family's health, versus shared interest where we really only do all succeed if each of us succeeds together?

And then a third tension is one between governments needing to tackle the urgency of the situation, but also the need to rebuild a better structural answer in the longer term and the urgent so often crowds out the important.

So in today's episode, we're joined by a couple of pretty amazing people to talk about this, Martín Abregú and Elizabeth Sidiropoulos, to discuss ways that COVID-19 vaccine equity

could be improved around the world. And also, how do we understand how we even got here. Martín is the vice president for international programs at the Ford Foundation. He's a human rights lawyer by training, and he seeks to respond to the global drivers of inequality by bringing new voices and perspectives into the international arena. Full disclosure to our listeners, the Ford Foundation is also a financial supporter of Brookings. Everyone's opinion expressed today is their own.

Elizabeth is the CEO of the South African Institute of International Affairs. She's an expert in South Africa's foreign policy, South-South cooperation across the so-called developing world, and the role of emerging powers in Africa. She has more than two decades of experience in the field of politics and international relations.

Martín and Elizabeth co-moderated Room 10, a working group for SDG, Sustainable Development Goal, number 10 on reduced inequalities in this year's 17 Rooms process. For new listeners, 17 Rooms is an approach to spurring action for the Sustainable Development Goals. It convenes 17 working groups, one per SDG, and asks them to focus on an area within an SDG that's ripe for action, and then to find some concrete next steps that can be achieved in 12 to 18 months to make progress.

Zia, this group has a tall order in figuring out how to boil down not just a new consensus on the problem, but how to really move it forward for action.

KHAN: That's exactly right, John, and we're really lucky to be able to chat with Martín and Elizabeth because they look at this problem with new insights, new lenses, not in a way just to add complications, but to open up windows for action. Martín and Elizabeth are co-moderators of Room 10, the working group for SDG 10 on reduced inequalities. This is their story.

MCARTHUR: Elizabeth, welcome to 17 Rooms.

SIDIROPOULOS: John, good to be with you.

MCARTHUR: And Martín, such a pleasure to have you here, too.

ABREGÚ: Thank you, John, great being here.

KHAN: Thank you both so much for joining us and what will be a very timely conversation. I'd like to start by asking you both your stories for how you got involved in your work in these issues and came to 17 Rooms. Maybe, Elizabeth, we could start with you.

SIDIROPOULOS: My background is actually in international relations, it's in foreign policy, but you know that terrain has changed so much since I was I was a student, which was a long time ago. And you know, international relations is not just about great power politics, but it's also so much about development, about issues that deal with lives at a local level and how the global impacts on the local, and of course, the other way around.

So in fact, over the last several years, both I and colleagues at the Institute have really been working on issues of development, on the SDGs, on issues of inequality, and so on. And of course, I come from a country where, you know, sadly, inequality is our middle name. South Africa has the highest inequality in the world. We are still, nearly 30 years after the end of

apartheid, grappling with the legacy of apartheid, and inequality is probably the most prominent feature of it. But it is supported by two pillars—by poverty and by unemployment. And just a couple of weeks ago, the latest statistics, just to put you in the picture, on unemployment show our rate to have gone up to just under 50 percent. That is significant. And it comes on the back of a COVID pandemic that has really affected the most marginalized people, not only in South Africa but across the developing world, and obviously to perhaps a lesser extent in the developed world.

And the fact is that at this particular point where we are in global affairs, if we don't really seriously grapple with these issues, these socio-economic developmental issues, the polarization that we've seen in the world that's become much more intense over the last several years is just going to become much worse. And all of the great ideas about getting to 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement are basically for nothing in a context where polarization has become so fraught in the social contract is completely broken.

KHAN: And Elizabeth, if you could tell us how you got connected to 17 Rooms.

SIDIROPOULOS: So, I've been doing some work with Brookings colleagues over the last few years around the SDGs and related issues. This is my first time in this project and this concept, I think it's a really great concept. And it's been an amazing experience of engaging with people from very different walks of life on a topic that while we are coming from different backgrounds, we all feel really passionately about. So that's how I came to be here today.

KHAN: Fantastic. Thank you. And Martín, how about yourself?

ABREGÚ: My background is human rights. I was trained as a human rights lawyer, and that's where I focused my early years in my career, et cetera. But as you start working on human rights, you realize that unless you really bring the inequality framework, all the work that you're doing around human rights is limited. Yes, of course, in the '60s and the '70s, maybe even the 80s, having a sort of a universal vision of human rights was meaningful. But beginning in the '90s, it became evidently clear that human rights was not distributed evenly in society. And I always remember this guy from a *favela* in Brazil who said something like, I heard that human rights are great, but to me human rights are caviar, right? People say it's great, but I have no idea how it tastes.

So that kind of idea made me really engage on working on issues around inequalities, still with a human rights perspective, but really leaning more into understanding how all these great principles were not enforced or accessed in the same way across different lines.

And, again, my background was working at the national level. I started working in my home country, Argentina. Then I moved to work in South America more broadly, more like at the multi-local level and comparing between Colombia, Peru, and Chile, Argentina, et cetera. But eventually it became evidently clear that any meaningful work around inequality needs to happen at the global level. And there is no way that you are going to be addressing the global trends of inequality working at a national level or even a multinational level.

So that's where joining the Ford Foundation and really thinking about, what are these global trends that we need to address. But at the same time, my bias has always been about these

local experiences. And therefore, to me, the challenge has always been about connecting the global with the local because having only a local conversation is not going to help us address inequality. But having a global conversation without paying attention to people on the ground is not going to solve our worries.

So that's how I had this great conversation with John. Like, I don't know, John, that may have been probably three or four years ago, where we were basically discussing this idea of we are not going to reimagine globalization with a bunch of globalists. Right? We need a perspective around globalization that is about bringing new players into the conversation. And that's how I ended up engaging in 17 Rooms, because actually I see 17 Rooms as an amazing opportunity to really discuss all these global issues, but with a very with very diverse perspectives. And not only in terms of thematic expertise or even the kind of work that you have been doing in the past, but most importantly to me, it's an amazing opportunity to bring people working at the local level to engage with people working at the global level. So that conversation, to me, is a unique asset of 17 Rooms and one of the key reasons why I continue to be excited about this process.

MCARTHUR: Well, we're so grateful to both of you for bringing that energy and perspective, and we take the compliment to heart this is useful. I'm curious how you would each describe that tension between global efforts to tackle inequality and local efforts to tackle inequality, especially in the modern era, because there are a lot of people who feel that tackling inequality globally is just boiling the ocean—you're not going to make progress because so much of the brass tacks politics, constrains, vested interests is local. How do you think about the best entry points for making progress internationally on those local dynamics?

SIDIROPOULOS: That's a great question, John. I don't think it's an either/or and the two dimensions are intricately connected. Clearly at a domestic level, the policy choices that governments make will have an impact on whether, in that particular locale, inequality is reduced or inequality is increased.

And you can look at the two most preeminent cases of inequality in recent times, you know, South Africa and Brazil. And over time, they've had a number of policy choices that have helped to perhaps improve the rating a little bit, but certainly in the South African case we've regressed again. And that might be policy choices around social protection schemes, incentives to get kids to go to school and so on and so forth, like Brazil has also done. That's critical.

And that really is within the domain of the particular country and particular government. And I think where you also have a very active and engaged civil society that is also constantly advocating and campaigning for some of these issues, that's important. So that's the domestic.

But there are also certain things that are the superstructure. And so we can look at the local and we can say the government didn't do well on this and they didn't do well on that. But, you know, when you also have rules of the game at the global level that sometimes actually really, really constrain the way in which you can operate and the way in which you behave, it also places constraints on the policy choices you make. I'm not suggesting for a moment that the government should abdicate their role in making good policy choices because they can blame it all on the superstructure. But there is a very real problem in that terrain.

And just to give you a couple of examples there. International taxation and the way in which the issue of illicit financial flows is not just about corruption, but also about, companies being able to really siphon off in a very legal way a lot of money which they should be paying tax, for example. And this has been a big campaign of the African continent, the global rules allow that to happen. And when they change they don't really change with the little guy in mind. The recent agreement on taxation changes enough to deal with the issues that are really important for the global north, for the developed world. But that doesn't plug all the gaps that we would like in the developing world to plug.

And of course, the other big issue, for example, is pharmaceuticals. The big issue of 2020-2021 has been vaccines, but more broadly pharmaceuticals and intellectual property rights. If you as a developing economy do not actually have the capacity to produce or the technical know-how to produce—and one of the biggest issues in that regard was, for example, the problem of HIV/AIDS in the late 1990s, early 2000s, and patents on IPR—you'll have to pay through your nose in order to actually provide your citizens with what should actually be one of the basic fundamental rights around access to health care. And those are things that countries on their own can't deal with can't address.

Now, how do you make that connection? Well, as you know, I think there is a role for civil society advocacy. I don't know how far this can go because certainly in the last couple of years, it hasn't gone very far. There is a case to be made that as human beings, our primordial instincts are survival first. So let's forget about the prefrontal cortex, let's focus on the on the back, and that we believe that if we feel under threat, we must protect ourselves first. What we've actually seen in the last two years is if that is the thinking that will dominate in the way in which leaders and countries as a whole respond, that isn't going to actually help us deal with some of these transnational, interlinked challenges that require the rules at the top, at the global level, to change in order for us to actually feel the difference at the grassroots level, at the local level in various countries.

MCARTHUR: Martín, maybe that's actually a nice bridge to this question of entry points, but in the context of what the Room has been working on. Because I've often described the world of politics as a three-tier chessboard—there's the community leader and they're always feeling constrained by the federal or national government. The national government is always feeling constrained by the global system. But you're also upending that a little bit, saying there's a gap in leadership at the top of the top everywhere. And Elizabeth, if I were to paraphrase, described our lizard brains that are of self-interest that people are using that are avoiding the higher reasoning of shared interest. How do we break that? How do you think about vaccine equity as a decisive challenge for that higher form of shared interest? What are the entry points to make a difference?

ABREGÚ: So, first of all, when we think about vaccines and vaccine inequity, we definitely need to think about it as a proxy. Right? It's not the issue in the sense that if we solve the problem of vaccine, we are going to solve every other problem. But it is the perfect example of everything that is wrong with the systems that we are dealing with. So in that sense, that's why vaccine inequality is so important because it makes such a compelling test case about everything that is wrong and everything that we could do to get us to a different place. Because, I don't want to use the word "beauty," but the beauty of the vaccine inequity case is that actually it's a super easy to solve problem, and we are still unable to solve it. So we know what's the problem, we know what's the solution, we know it's not expensive, we

know we have the capacity. So why is it that we are not solving it, right? So to me, that's the reason why focusing on this problem is felt so powerful.

The question here is if it's so easy, so simple, et cetera, how come we are not solving it? And this has to do with the fact that we are into this vicious cycle that it's actually not allowing us to identify easy entry points to disrupt it. And basically, even though we know that until we are all safe, no one is safe, we all want to be safe first.

And Elizabeth, you may disagree with this, but I wonder what would have happened if a new variant would have showed up in a neighbor country from South Africa? Do you think that South Africa would have not closed the limits? I'm not sure. I think that most countries would have done what the U.K. or the U.S. did. Not that it's the right answer, let's just be clear. But I think that we have this challenge between what we should do and what we are asked to do tomorrow. And how do we manage that? In one of our meetings, someone said something that I found revealing. I don't remember, the prime minister of some country in Europe, actually, I think it was said something like, we all know what we need to do. What we don't know is how to get elected after we do that.

And that's the challenge that we have these days. We have this vicious cycle that, A, even if we know that there are all these of potential answers, we have all these collective demands coming our way and we cannot respond in the way that we expect, and it's a trend, and everyone is trying to save themselves first.

So, to me at the end of the day is how do we get better at solving collective problems. Is this the collective action not in a sense of how do we bring more people to do certain things, but it's a collective action problem in the sense that we all need to solve it together, but no one is willing to take the first step.

And this actually, John, I think, it's the key challenge that we have here, and that's where the lack of leadership is coming from. It's not because our leaders are not smart, it's not because they don't see it. It's because, we all got the wrong incentives. So at the end of the day how are we going to come up with the right incentives? In order to come up with the right incentives we need to work at many different levels. One of the things that came up during our conversations within the Room is how do you build national constituencies asking for something different? There is an article today, I think, all these countries in the north rushing to give boosters to people. I haven't heard anyone saying, boosters are not the priority. I am not going to get my booster there because I want that shot to go to some country in the global south so we don't have a new variant. I haven't heard one single person and I'm actually not sure I would that tomorrow if we have the possibility to access a booster.

So this question here is like, how are we going to get the right incentives? And so, in that sense, I do think that, again going back to the whole idea of 17 Rooms, it's an interesting one in the sense of can you start creating a slightly different understanding of what kind of agreements and what kind of responses we need to come up. And how do we deal with the fact that we need to give those leaders a powerful reason to do the right thing? And that's why in our Room we spend a lot of time focusing on selfish reasons. There is something tricky about selfish reasons, but at the end of the day, there has to be something there for people to be able to explain why they are doing what is the selfish long-term response.

KHAN: You're raising this really interesting point about selfishness and doing the right thing. And I also think we're having this conversation in the context of a very interesting situation where the Omicron variant is coming up and it's something that so many of us are banging our heads against the wall because we saw this coming for about a year, that if we don't get the world vaccinated, this is what's going to happen. And I have this theory—it could be a naive theory—that most people show up to work thinking they are doing the right thing and that they are acting in a fair way. But as you had pointed out, political leaders have this tension of, well, if I don't impose a travel ban, I just won't get elected and therefore I won't be able to enact the agenda that I believe in, et cetera.

I'm curious as you analyze this very current situation that's happening with Omicron, are there some targeted things, very specific ideas based on your room discussion or just as you're analyzing the situation, that if we had just changed the incentives a certain way, if we had just been able to create a little bit more awareness with a certain group of people, are there some targeted opportunities as you analyze this current situation that we could use and generalize more broadly?

ABREGÚ: One key question here is the question of timing. The moment that you have a new variant, it's too late to tell people, don't close the border. Basically we should have avoided the new variant. It was feasible.

One key thing that we need to get better at is to stop short term thinking, and we have a lot of short-term thinking throughout the pandemic. One thing that we tried to do in our Room was to do like, okay, we are not trying to have a solution for tomorrow. But can we be in a different place next year, at least, right? Or two years from now, or actually 10 years from now? Because what we want to ensure is that there are some important lessons here that will save us from the next pandemic that is certainly going to happen and we know that too, right?

So honestly, I think that if we learned some stuff here that is going to get us to a better place five years from now, it's not a small thing. So in that sense, I think that the whole question of preparedness/prevention need long term thinking, that one key thing that we need to be paying attention and not all of us need to be thinking about how do we need to respond to this tomorrow. That's one thing I want to stress.

Second thing is, we start with conversations with a bunch of governments that lack legitimate power, These governments do not have the legitimacy of the governments that we used to have in the '50s and the '60s. Basically, all these governments are running from behind. They need to be responding to people in a way that is complicated. That's why they don't have the room to maneuver, to say, trust me. These governments cannot tell people, "trust me, trust me I know what I'm doing, give me some time to answer these problems."

This question of lack of legitimacy is directly related to inequality. Because basically, what you are seeing is that all your governments are unable to stop the biggest challenge that you are facing. And this is again where the global and local comes together. If inequality is increasing everywhere in the world, it's because it's about global trends. It's not because all the countries decided that suddenly they wanted to become more unequal. It's because there are some global trends that it's a race to the bottom that started in the '80s and that took us here.

So in that sense we have global trends and local impact, local negative impact. What we need to do now is to try to reverse it. Can we build upon those local trends against inequality to build some kind of global will against inequality? That's what this work is supposed to be about. That's why the kind of alliance that we need is an alliance that we are not used to because it's not only about civil society—it's not that civil society are the good guys and governments are the bad guys, et cetera. What we need is an alliance that is going to bring these players together in a different way within an alliance that includes social movements, that includes civil society, that includes governments, that includes people in international financial institutions that are also trying to do the right thing. And that we all together start addressing those local trends.

So that's where the different incentives can come up, because right now each of these groups is trying to solve the problem from their own point of view—civil society is trying to persuade their governments, governments are trying to persuade the multinational organizations. And what we need is a different kind of consortium that is bringing the right kind of players into a different conversation.

MCARTHUR: We could go truly for hours on this because there's so many underlying complexities. Each issue has a route and each issue has so many stakeholders that need to come together. The place you were going really did make me think about South Africa because as Elizabeth was saying, there's this deep challenge of worsening inequality within South Africa. But also there's this inequality of how South Africa has been treated locally, and the punishment in a sense that it received for having such a strong epidemic epidemiological surveillance system, which led to the travel bans and so forth and many people charging hypocrisy, and no good deed goes unpunished. But as Martín said, it's not entirely clear that a country would have acted differently if it was a neighboring source of information. How does this feel from South Africa's perspective and how these coalitions for change looking forward might come together?

SIDIROPOULOS: So I think the point that Martín has made about multi-stakeholder alliances is absolutely correct. I think the way in which you also begin to change some of these narratives is also through bringing in people from different constituencies. And I think the point that Zia made is correct. I don't think people go to work thinking they are going to do bad, at least not most people. So I think that's an important point.

What is interesting, of course, in the context of the South African experience since mid-November is that the variant was actually found both in South Africa *and* in Botswana, our neighboring country. So we were all affected by it. And I think the point that Martín made about the extent to which a country would respond by closing off its borders, it's a valid question. And certainly in a developing country context where you also have fewer resources at your disposal in order to be able to deal with the pandemic, that becomes an even more pertinent question in terms of how you would protect your population.

The fact is that you can argue that travel bans don't really work. And in the second instance, as you said, here was a country that was trying to be a good global citizen to help the broader fight against the pandemic. But the question is, did we have to get to where we are now? Did we have to get to, as I say, halfway through the Greek alphabet? And did we not expect that this would be the case? And there were a number of proposals on the table from early on in terms of how you deal with the pandemic.

MCARTHUR: Most people feel like we shouldn't be where we are. And I'm curious how we think about the forward lessons from those proposals, if you can, just as you described these proposals, like what does it mean for the next step of what could be done, say, in 2022?

SIDIROPOULOS: One of the issues that should still be on the agenda and needs to be accelerated is being able to build up manufacturing capacity, even if we don't tackle the issue of intellectual property rights at this point and vaccines, I think is important. And that is really something that speaks to the heart not just of this pandemic, but of the pandemics to come. It happened to be the coronavirus that spreads so widely, but we've had SARS before that, we've had Ebola, again, much more limited in geographical spread but still absolutely critical. So that's one issue.

The other issue, I think, does relate to the kinds of incentives that Martín was talking about that might incentivize people and particularly here, if you're talking about some of the big multinationals—because actually one of the issues here is not just the government, it's also about how the private sector and certain parts of the private sector respond—is how do you create incentives that in cases of pandemics, we're not saying in all cases, but certainly in cases of pandemics there is a collective effort. It's not that I'm there to realize greater gains for my shareholders, but actually that there is a responsibility there. There is the ESG dimension that we talk about and so often and that has moved much more to the fore, I think, in the last couple of years.

I've been thinking about South Africa's transition to democracy and how that happened. Because the former deputy president, F.W. de Klerk, passed away a couple of weeks ago and people have been thinking about how we made that jump. If you had asked many people in 1989 or 1990, would we be sitting with President Nelson Mandela on the 10th of May 1994, most people would have said no. But what F.W. de Klerk managed to do, for all his baggage (and there was lots of that) was he managed to bring a constituency within that four or five years earlier nobody would have thought was actually possible.

And I suppose that's the kind of thing we're looking for at the global level in terms of this collective action. And it's not just one person. It can't just be one person. But leadership is critical. So that point about will it help me, it won't help me to get reelected—that's a short term and very, very real concern for politicians. But F.W. de Klerk lost power, he negotiated himself out of power. And I'm not suggesting that happened across the board. But it does mean that there actually has to be, particularly at the leadership level, that broad sense of the picture that in many of these challenges related to inequality, if we don't tackle them in a global way and think about ourselves first, we're cutting off our nose to spite our face.

It does require leaders to help change the narrative and get their constituency to follow them. And that's about trust, and that's about the social contract. And I think that's the biggest issue. And how do we create trust? Well, it's difficult. And this is what we're facing in the world today, is that complete break of trust between the governed and the governors, and that's where I think our big problem is and that's where we also have a dearth of leadership.

KHAN: Elizabeth, I have a question building on that, which is when I think about climate disasters sometimes there's a way to think about a response that just addresses the immediate damage, and sometimes there's a way to think about a response that helps prevent disasters in the future. And I'm curious, as you look at the current crisis that we're looking at within the crisis of the pandemic—I'm referring to the specific Omicron variant issue—do you have

some thoughts around what could be a response now that would help solve the near-term equity challenge, but also help build the kind of trust that you're describing to help pave the way for longer term equity in the future? Is there something from the Room discussion or things that you're seeing right now?

SIDIROPOULOS: The near-term response is one that relates to being able to really ramp up the vaccine rollout in the developing world. I'm not talking about South Africa only but in the developing world. That for me is critical because otherwise in the next few months, we will be sitting with the Omega variant. And I think that's the issue. So for me, that is paramount. But I can't see that happening.

And what is tragic is the fact that, as I said, it's not that we now have a shortage of supply, but that that supply is either not getting to where it needs to get or in some instances it's allowed to expire—it's shelf life has expired and people haven't used it and it's gone. We discussed this in the room as well, the IMF brought out a study a little earlier this year, which basically said that vaccinating the world—although now I would argue with the Omicron variant it has probably changed a little bit because vaccines may need to be adapted—it would cost 50 billion dollars. That's really not a great deal of money when you think of the havoc that it has caused to the global economy and the fact that in the developing world, it has also caused many countries to go into serious debt distress.

So, that brings me to the next the next issue, is not just about vaccine rollout, but I think also at the same time about financing questions. And being a little bolder with the initiatives that have been made around debt—and I would argue, Zia, you spoke about climate change and climate finance is also a dimension of it and when we talk about the just transition in that regard—how do we ease the burden on developing countries to actually be able to come to grips with some of the significant public health and socio-economic challenges that we've seen in the last two years, as well as the really significant climate change issues around drought flooding in parts of Africa as well over the last year that have just created a perfect storm? And that is a slightly longer-term thing, that's not a near-term thing. But it is also about thinking about how we do financing and whether that our financing actually is the problem, is as much a problem as it is a solution when it comes to dealing with the pandemic and with climate change.

MCARTHUR: I'm afraid we only have a few minutes left in this conversation. But I'm curious, Martín, your take on this question. For our listeners, many of them might be listening right now and saying, ugh, it's just so complicated. Inequality is this perennial challenge, just feel it's getting worse, it's out of control. How do you think about this sense of next steps? It's always the 17 Rooms question, next steps, I think Zia was getting at that. What could make a difference to some piece of the puzzle? How do you think about that, Martín?

ABREGÚ: I fully agree that all of this feels overwhelming. We don't necessarily know where to start. And I think when we go back to this question of the incentives then we see that these are all the wrong incentives—and you are a good global citizen and then you are punished. I think that the best possible scenario is accepting the fact that a lot of key players need to do both. They are going to do a bunch of things that are problematic and at the same time they need to do much more than that. So at the same time that there may be travel bans, there may be specific money to ensure that all HIV people get vaccinated ASAP. Let's put a focus on that now that we know that there is a risk.

So I think that the key point here is to accept that some things we are not going to like, but they need to happen because of some local dynamics or whatever. But there is much more than can be done.

And therefore, I think that we also need to pay attention to us because I think it's super easy to think about lack of leadership as someone else's problem and not as our problem, too. So actually, when I hear all of us having this conversation, I wonder, okay, what are you guys doing to fix it? And you know, honestly, it's not enough. We're not doing enough together. We are not building the coalition that we need to build. We don't have the leadership that we need. We need a different kind of coalition. We need a different kind of leadership that is actually going to be able to engage with these key players in a different, smarter, more strategic way, both in the short term and the long term. So to some extent, if you ask me, what's the next step? Let's start putting our own house in order. If we really think that this is so easy to solve, how do we bring the key players from our side to bring all these efforts and to be able to engage with the people who can solve these problems in a meaningful way.

And I actually think that the pandemic in that sense is a tricky issue, because it's very difficult to organize what we could call the victims of the pandemic. Because we are all victims of this pandemic, it's difficult. Like, when you have a pandemic like HIV, the HIV movement organized itself in such a powerful manner because of a bunch of reasons that made them come together in a very powerful way. We don't have that now.

Solving this problem is not my daily job. It's not Elizabeth's daily job, it's not, John's, your daily job. Whose daily job is to solve this issue? Honestly, you can say WHO. Yeah, it's not working, right? It's like, who's doing the job on our side, whose daily job is to really make this change happen? So if you ask me the next step, that to me is the big question of how do we start putting our own house in order in order to create our own leadership that can definitively start pushing that other leadership that is supposed to be out there having the tools to address these issues. So I don't know if this is the kind of answer that you were looking for, John. I know that it's not very optimistic. But I do think we need to be realistic that we are not doing everything that we can.

MCARTHUR: We like to usually ask people for their vision of success by 2030. I think you've both just outlined it in a very multilayered way around all the types of things and incentives that need to change. If we could just ask each of you literally for a sentence or two of what's one thing that gives you hope that things could get better by 2030? You're both such serious and deep intellects on these issues, I think people would be really interested to hear what something that gives you inspiration for where it could go.

SIDIROPOULOS: The fact that there are many people, many organizations, many actors across the world who are actually having these discussions, pushing these issues, advocating. This is not a one-sided debate. I think the awareness has become much more acute in the last couple of years. As I said, it doesn't mean we've sorted out all our problems, not by a long shot. But I think that's so critical, that gives me hope. The fact that, firstly, we have amazing global frameworks like the SDGs, which were created by us, the actors that we are talking about today, and that the debates and the narratives are constantly evolving and being shaped. And there are people out there who feel passionately about these issues and are fighting for them.

MCARTHUR: Martín?

ABREGÚ: We are in the moment that we all understand how inequality is making everything much more complicated, and more unfair than everything. So to some extent, I think that there is not really a meaningful conversation to have around inequality any longer. And that basically opens up an opportunity and a challenge. If we basically accept the fact that inequality is wrong, but we cannot solve it, then it's going to take a long time to get us out of here.

On the other hand, if this is the opportunity that we need to start really thinking that unless we address inequality, we are going to be facing many more challenges similar to these, then there is an opportunity.

So to me the key question is, can we really come up with a consensus that unless we start building systems that address inequality instead of reinforcing them, there is no one future. There are going to be different futures there for different players going in different directions. And that is going to be extremely disturbing. And the idea that a global world actually brings us together in a way that could be also positive, but also very unsafe, so risky, et cetera. So in that sense, I feel like this is what success would look like, that to really reach that consensus we need to come up with those systems sooner rather than later.

So again, very broad answer. Not exactly something that will be like a very immediate success. It took us 50 years to get to this place, it will take us at least a couple of decades to make some real progress.

KHAN: Well, I just want to thank you both for your leadership in the Room for this very insightful and very timely conversation that we just had. Thank you, Elizabeth and Martín.

John, that was a fascinating discussion, so many interesting perspectives. I couldn't help but keep coming back in my mind to this underlying issue of trust that both Martín and Elizabeth touched on, and particularly with how we tackle this issue of people optimizing for their self-interest even if they know if everyone cooperates, they can get to a much better place for themselves and everyone else. It's almost like a prisoner's dilemma kind of situation. And how the idea of taking small steps to build that trust, to solve a challenge with people where they can get to that better common good by proving they trust each other in a smaller scale and slowly expanding that to a bigger challenge and then a bigger challenge is an interesting pathway that they're proposing.

MCARTHUR: Yeah, I think I had two competing sets of thoughts as we were in this conversation, Zia. One was this could be called a whole conversation on inequality without easy answers because it is complicated, it is tough to think through everything. And it is hard to keep all the perspectives in mind that one needs to keep in mind in order to make progress. But the flip side is exactly as you say—even the hardest problems can have surprising new voices that help drive change that might be the unexpected allies that use their influence in all sorts of new ways. And sometimes it really does come down to who can deliver a new sense of trust and who can show that a system can work and deliver on its promise because that is so foundational.

So that's something that actually can be taken forward at any scale. People in their community can think about how to build trust so people can count on their system a little bit more. But crucially, also the most influential and powerful global leaders can think about

how to build trust to make systems work so that people feel like things are going to get done to support their needs.

Well, it's a big, big topic, and it's one that we're so grateful that our Room 10 colleagues contributed so much on this year. To learn more, find this episode at Brookings Dot Edu Slash 17 Rooms podcast. Coming up next, Room 4 with Elizabeth King and Urvashi Sahni on the development of a global coalition for learning teams. We'll see you soon.

I'm John McArthur.

KHAN: And I'm Zia Khan, and this has been 17 Rooms.

MCARTHUR: Our thanks go out to the guests you heard today, and also to the production team, including Fred Dews and Alexandra Bracken, producers; Jacob Taylor, associate producer; Gaston Reboledo, audio engineer, and Nicolette Kelly, audio intern. The show art was designed by Katie Merris. Additional support comes from Shrijana Khanal, Ian McAllister, Soren Messner-Zidell, Andrea Risotto, Marie Wilkin, Chris McKenna, Esther Rosen, David Batcheck, and Caio Pereira at the Brookings Institution, and Nathalia dos Santos, Sara Geisenheimer, Hunter Goldman, and Miranda Waters at The Rockefeller Foundation.

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