



**The Brookings Institution
Center for Sustainable Development**

and

The Rockefeller Foundation

17 Rooms Podcast

“A local problem-solving framework that benefits people and oceans”

January 6, 2022

Co-Hosts:

John McArthur
Senior Fellow and Director, Center for Sustainable Development
The Brookings Institution

Zia Khan
Senior Vice President for Innovation
The Rockefeller Foundation

Guests:

Lisa Dreier
Managing Director
Advanced Leadership Initiative, Harvard University

David Obura
Founding Director
CORDIO East Africa

Episode Summary:

In this eleventh interview of the “17 Rooms” podcast, Lisa Dreier and David Obura discuss developing solutions for working seascapes that address multiple SDGs while safeguarding biodiversity and climate, empowering and nourishing communities, and engaging local stakeholder groups. Dreier, managing director of the Advanced Leadership Initiative at Harvard and Obura, founding director for CORDIO East Africa, moderated Room 14 focused on Sustainable Development Goal number 14—on life below water—during the 2021 17 Rooms flagship process.

MCARTHUR: 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.

John, I'm super excited about this podcast, not only because I have a Ph.D. in fluid dynamics and this is about oceans, but because oceans are so big, they're so important and that they often don't make the headlines.

MCARTHUR: Well, Zia, I cannot speak to anything about fluid dynamics because I know nothing about them, but I do love the oceans having grown up on the Pacific coast in Vancouver myself and oceans are very much part of my upbringing, but also because oceans are 70 percent of the planet. And one of the things I've experienced—we talked about this a little bit earlier in the podcast series—is that they're often overlooked because people don't live in the oceans. Typically, they might live on the coast or on an island, but 70 percent of the planet is filled with other forms of life, sometimes miles below the surface, and we as humans only see that surface as much as we count on everything happening below the surface. So it's interesting that today's conversation is going to focus on how to have a new type of conversation around what's in the oceans and how it connects to our own lives.

KHAN: And John, you may say you don't know much about fluid dynamics, but you manage chaos and turbulence very well, I have to say in my experience.

MCARTHUR: Some people would say I create it.

KHAN: Well, today we're going to hear about a really fascinating output from this room. It's an innovation, but it's a process innovation. You'll hear our co-moderators talk about an SDG narrative approach. And what I take away from, it is a way to take these big global goals and bring them to a local community and have the local community use those goals as a way to learn about each other's different perspectives and different goals but come up with a shared vision for the community and then develop a story and a plan for how they're going to realize that vision. And that is really compelling and interesting.

MCARTHUR: And it is interesting that something so essential as how we talk about these issues—these big global issues, but also the backyard issues are the front yard issues of where people live—and how they're seeing the differences of perspective and how they can come up with a shared vision in their community. It's also interesting because as this SDG narrative framework has been taking shape, it started with the oceans, but it doesn't need to only be from the perspective of oceans. It can be from the perspective of any Goal, but one that bridges across Goals.

So today in this episode, we're going to be joined by Lisa Dreier and David Obura to learn about their efforts to develop this new framework, what they call the SDG Narrative Approach, that can help identify and catalyze systemic action that benefits people, ocean biodiversity, and ocean-based economic activities. Lisa leads the Advanced Leadership Initiative at Harvard University, has an extensive track record in tackling global hunger and other big global issues with organizations like the World Economic Forum, the United Nations, and Columbia University.

David is the founding director of CORDIO East Africa, an organization that specializes in generating knowledge and solutions that benefit marine ecosystems and people throughout the

Indian Ocean. David is a scientist and his primary research is on coral reef resilience, including in response to climate change, and also the biogeography of the Indian Ocean.

David and Lisa co-moderate Room 14, a working group for Sustainable Development Goal, SDG, 14 on life below water in this year's 17 Rooms process. For new listeners, 17 Rooms is an approach to spring action for the Sustainable Development Goals. It convenes 17 working groups, one per SDG, and asks them to focus on an area within that Goal that is ripe for action and then to define some concrete next steps that can be achieved in 12 to 18 months to make progress. Zia, I'm looking forward to this.

KHAN: John, so am I. Both of our co-moderators have fascinating and different personal stories, and they sought each other out to take advantage of those differences to come up with something really innovative. Lisa and David co-moderate Room 14, the working group for SDG 14 on life below water. This is their story.

MCARTHUR: David, welcome to 17 Rooms.

OBURA: Thank you, John

MCARTHUR: And Lisa, so nice to have you here, too.

DREIER: Great to be here.

KHAN: Thank you both so much. It's great to have you here. I would like to start if you could each share your story of how you came to this issue and how you came to 17 Rooms. Lisa, maybe we could start with you.

DREIER: Great. Well, I grew up in a very globally connected family, so I had a passion for connecting people around the world early on, and then got into sustainability issues and was eventually led to my work on global food systems and food security and met John McArthur at that same time being part of the UN Millennium Project, which was charged with developing strategies to meet the Millennium Development Goals. And that was a really thrilling and exciting project. I was part of a task force that was working to figure out strategies to dramatically reduce hunger. It was a really impassioned team and network orchestrated by John. And I became really convinced through that that global hunger was an absolute scandal, that it was solvable, that the world was moving much too slowly to make progress. It seemed to be the sort of giant bureaucratic institutions in slow motion.

And I became really intrigued by the role of the private sector. We had a couple of business leaders on our global task force, and I noticed that they were practical, ruthlessly interested in efficiency, innovative. And I wouldn't say that all business leaders are angels, but I saw that there was a skill set and a mindset and a set of resources in the private sector that was being underutilized in the campaign for global sustainability. So I decided I wanted to try to mobilize the private sector to take more action on hunger and food security.

And I went to the World Economic Forum with that goal, since it's a major convener of business as well as many other stakeholders and founded their first initiative on global food security and agriculture. It grew to be quite large over the following 10 years, catalyzing national alliances in 21 countries, a number of regional platforms, global action in Davos. And I saw through that this incredible power of bringing stakeholders together to share ideas and develop collaboration in new ways. And that's what really gave me the passion for working on what began as the MDGs and is now the SDGs and really helping people come together and work on that.

KHAN: Thank you so much. David, how about you?

OBURA: Thanks, Zia. So I'm Kenyan, I grew up in Kenya, living in the city of Nairobi. But my mother is from the UK originally, and one of her passions with three small kids was to take us on safari. And so we spent a lot of time out in nature and game parks and climbing mountains, but also by the sea. And I grew up knowing that I would be an outdoor biologist of some sort or a wildlife photographer. I even thought I might be a marine biologist until I watched "Jaws," and then I decided against that for a few years. But that led me to study in the U.S., and I picked up on marine science in my undergraduate and graduate school years. I came back to Kenya to do my Ph.D. thesis topic focused on coral reefs. So I've had a single track moving through all of this.

But at the same time, even as a teenager growing up in Kenya, I could see that landscapes were changing in front of my eyes. And it was because of population growth and development and this huge human pressure that was growing and pressuring on the environment. And so as I started to study coral reefs, of course, I became very aware of how important they are to people for sustaining livelihoods and so on.

And in looking at the vulnerability of coral reefs to climate change and overfishing and all the pressures we have on them, I became very interested in sustainability as a general concept. And then the Sustainable Development Goals came out around 2015. And looking at them, of course, they are a very high-level conceptual framework determined by countries at the UN level and seem very divorced from people's lives. But really, when I looked at them, it seemed that they could really apply locally and that they should apply locally, and in moving more and more towards looking at that and being less and less of a coral biologist, I thought this is where I want to go in terms of having an impact because coral reefs, like many systems, are showing us a sign of things to come and we need to work fast. And so that's why I came to the SDG work.

MCARTHUR: And how did these respective paths come together in 17 Rooms? So here you are, Lisa, coordinating these huge global coalitions—business, many stakeholders, World Economic Forum, Davos, this is big stuff. And then, David, here you are, leading this scientific frontier and collaboration around oceans and different forms of understanding policy debates. Those are pretty divergent paths, one might guess. Can you just share a bit about how you came to 17 Rooms? David?

OBURA: So that's a great question, actually, because a lot of my community in marine science and ocean science, we are working on the big questions, trying to expand protection across the oceans, the big MPAs—marine protected areas—the bigger, the better in many ways for a lot of different reasons. But I was very conscious of the fact that people live at a small scale. And if we don't do conservation where people live in their local areas, of course they will miss out. And the healthy nature that we might be able to conserve through all our actions will be far away from them.

Now, I came to these sort of lab and innovation type processes through something called the Sustainable Oceans Lab, and when our colleague and friend of mine was working with the 17 Rooms before on the oceans Room—Enric Sala and Kristen Rechberger—and when they suggested that I take over this Room, I thought that that's a great idea, I'd love to do that. I'd love to get to this space where we can bring people into the informal setting and really try and engage around this problematic. And in talking about that with you guys, you gave me a few options and I didn't want to work with somebody I already knew and we had similar backgrounds with similar perspectives. And you gave me a few options of people with some very techie backgrounds, some very computational backgrounds and Lisa's background in engaging people. I thought that sounds about right. I would like to talk to Lisa.

MCARTHUR: And Lisa, maybe you can share a little bit about how you entered this, because as David said, we were introduced to David through Enric and Kristen who had previously co-moderated Room 14 in past years. And then David seemed such an exciting person—we just got to know you earlier this year, David. And then, it was your work really on systems leadership for the SDGs that I think tipped our thinking to say maybe there's an interesting kind of marriage of diverse thoughts here that might come together. How did it feel to you?

DREIER: It felt very exciting, and I really have you both to thank for that, John and David, for seeing the potential synergies and interesting sparks that might fly by bringing these things together. And as you mentioned, John, I have gotten really interested in the ideas around systems change and systems leadership and how to take a more systemic view of these big, complex issues around the Sustainable Development Goals. And that grew out of my work on food systems, and it's something that I've been working on here at Harvard in terms of trying to understand the different tactics that groups around the world are taking and trying to tackle really complex issues and mobilize many stakeholders towards a common goal, and then see what we can learn from those experiences and translate them into some concrete sort of practical tools that others can learn from and apply.

And so the idea of sharing some of that thinking with this group working on oceans was really exciting. And Africa has always been very close to my heart. So I was thrilled by the opportunity to work with David and with the group that was really championing piloting some of these approaches in Africa as well.

KHAN: So, you both fused your perspectives together, co-moderated a group and in very short time came up with some pretty practical next steps and actions. And maybe you could tell us a little bit about what your Room came up with. What is the practical action and what are you hoping to do next year?

OBURA: So, the idea sort of came through that, as I mentioned in my introduction, is the SDGs seem very intractable to people and inaccessible. And actually, I came to this about a year and a half ago as we were in this global policy processes for the Convention on Biological Diversity. They are writing a strategy founded on the Sustainable Development Goals, but in a way that wasn't really very clearly laid out. And I felt that it was very easy for countries and for experts to misunderstand each other about the potential of what this framework could do.

So being a scientist, I wrote a paper on it, and that's all very well and good, but it's very dry. And with the possibility of the 17 Rooms process I saw the chance to push that forward into an actual narrative development process. So can we bring it a range of people together? So with different expertise around the oceans and Lisa's experience with resistance to change and develop a process where we can help groups or facilitate groups to develop their own sustainability narratives using the language of the Sustainable Development Goals.

So the 17 Goals they say a particular thing about climate, oceans, or gender equality, food security. So they give a common language, basically. And my question is, can we develop a process where if groups go through this process, one, they can identify their own sustainability solutions, what they can do within their sphere of influence to build sustainability into their lives and businesses. But if you can get a range of different stakeholders to do it in a common place, they should be able to complement one another and find synergies and common causes for action, common challenges that they can help each other with and so on. And so what I hoped we could do is to build this process together and that this would lead to systems change. This would lead to real changes in behavior, not just at the individual level, but at an area level for a whole system of people living.

MCARTHUR: Can I just follow up on that, David, because I think it's so novel. This notion of taking these big, massive global Goals and this international process and converting it into a highly localized conversation. So you live in Mombasa on the coast of Kenya, you're abutting the Indian Ocean. This is a tourist site for many, a major city, port city for East Africa. And you see merit just to dive in on this, in using the SDGs to help inform the local conversation in a coastal community near Mombasa. So if I'm a local villager, maybe not in the big town of Mombasa but in a nearby village, how does this help me? Can you just share a little bit more about that?

OBURA: Yeah, I'd love to, because I think that's exactly where the power is. And I think the great thing about the Sustainable Development Goals is that countries and top people agonized over these for two years and negotiated them down to 17 irreducible units that they could agree on, basically. And that's based on human experience, the experience that they live, and that their families and their constituents live in the countries and the places of faith that they live in. So it should make sense.

And so in taking this forward, after writing this academic paper and as we were developing the 17 Rooms process, I wrote a much more playful article in an illustrated conservation magazine called *Current Conservation*—it's online, easy to find—and based the story around a household. So a couple that the man is a fisherman, the woman sells that fish in the markets and of course, does everything else that a woman does in the household in coastal Kenya. And you can build a narrative touching on all of the 17 Goals without using any technical terms for what their life is like and the things that they face and things touch on them. And because it's the local setting, it's relevant to others, their neighbors and other stakeholders, or a hotel in the area as well.

And I think what I hope to address with this is what I see as our basic problem or challenge is differences in attitudes, differences in cultures. People, I think, have the same aspirations in general around the world, but we have very different perceptions and coming together, and it's often a mismatch in communication or expectations or language that creates conflict. And so this is an opportunity to help that family establish common goals with the businesses and with the hotels and with the local government in their area. That's how I think it's really relevant in a context like Kenya.

KHAN: I'm curious, Lisa, from a systems change perspective, this is a very novel and exciting approach of thinking of a local community developing, tapping their local knowledge and expertise into a narrative that's really relevant for them. There's always a perceived risk with these approaches that they won't get to the right answer. That there is a right answer that experts and global institutions study this know they can apply best practices. I'm curious if you see a tension, if those tensions could be resolved between local communities who know their communities best but may not have access to global expertise, what does that mean in terms of systems change when we think about making big scale change around the world?

DREIER: I think that creating stronger connections between local communities and the global community is a really powerful idea and opportunity, and that's what excited me about the idea of the SDG Narrative Framework that David really brought into our Room. And I think the right answer may sometimes be the surprising answer to the global community and centering a local community in an SDG conversation will often bring things down to earth, tap into local and indigenous knowledge, and bring forward a vision that is sustainable and resilient in ways that global stakeholders may not be equipped to develop themselves.

And so I think it creates a way to spotlight and elevate and support local agendas and local visions and local goals with the support of the global community. And that resonates very much with the work that I had done in the past on food systems and working with national-level alliances and

particularly in developing countries where we would deliberately place those countries at the center of a global conversation and say, What is your vision? What is your goal? What are you trying to achieve? Let's trace the connections to how that contributes to the Global Sustainable Development Goals and see how the global community can support you. And so it flips the traditional sort of top-down paradigm that we often get stuck in when talking about these global goals and really puts the local and the countries themselves and the local stakeholders themselves at the center.

OBURA: Yeah, I feel if I can just jump in on that. There's a paper that was written recently by a group of authors based the Pacific working on coral reefs and fisheries. And the question is, what is fair to local communities when you come into governance and protection and things like that? And they have the best answer, they said just ask them what's fair and then go about trying to implement that. So I think this is an attempt to try and do that in a systematic way that can really help align and really build that leadership and the system change I think we really need to get to moving forward from here.

DREIER: The other thing that I think is nice about this idea is that it aims to make the SDGs more accessible and more of an opportunity to local communities. Sometimes the complexity of the SDGs can just seem overwhelming or paralyzing to many stakeholders, or just like something that they can't relate to their own local issues. And so by trying to streamline it and make it more accessible and practical, we're trying to bridge that gap between the local needs and global expertise and resources that's in this broader community.

And maybe just to speak a little about the practicalities of this narrative framework. The idea has basically three steps. One is to encourage communities that are taking this approach to develop a shared vision, an ocean-based vision for sustainability. And this is something that can happen after a lot of dialog and convening of diverse stakeholders, and often has to be quite a broad vision to get everyone under that one tent. But at least then you have everyone working towards a shared vision. And then to look across that amazing 17 Goal array of the SDGs and focus in on a subset of SDGs that are the most powerful and the most central to achieving that shared vision. So maybe three or four or five SDGs that the community feels are really at the core of what they are trying to achieve with their local vision. And then figuring out how to tap into the expertise and resources and momentum that may be in those other communities of those other SDGs and contribute that to local planning processes to generate investment and resources and connections that may help the local initiative to help prioritize and galvanize action.

And so through doing that, we're trying to connect the very local goals to these broader communities. And I think the idea is for it to help provide accessible and practical tools for local communities. So we need to do a little more work at refining that toolkit to help prioritize and define those connections, and then to help really raise the visibility of the importance of oceans and connect oceans-based initiatives to other sectors. I think oceans often doesn't necessarily get the spotlight that it deserves in terms of its importance in food security and climate change and sustainable livelihoods and so many other SDGs. And by really highlighting those connections and making the case to these other communities that may be a little bit siloed or not recognizing the importance of oceans to their issue, there's a great chance to develop new collaborations and activate new impacts.

MCARTHUR: There are a couple of pieces going on here. One is the localizing of this global language that's embedded in the SDGs, recognizing that there are all these 17 issues, they're all interconnected, but pulling them down to the ground level. There's another piece, which is how do you enter into that conversation where all those issues are interconnected locally. My understanding is that this was motivated, I think, David, through your work and seeing how there's a need to better connect the oceans-focused elements of the conversation with the other dimensions of life in these

communities. But oceans don't need to be the only entry point for how to have this conversation. And that's, I think, an important piece of what you're coming up with. So you're addressing an unaddressed need for ocean-based communities, but this could be a rural community far away from an ocean that might have a different entry point for localizing these multi-dimensional conversations. Is that a fair summary? How would you describe this? Because I think it's relevant for the oceans, but it seems like it's relevant for people outside the oceans-based conversation too.

OBURA: Yes, you're absolutely right on that, John. You can enter the Room of the SDGs from any of the Goals, depending on which is your focal goal. So as a marine biologist and conservationist and working in fishing communities, Goal 14 is the one that we enter from. But you could enter it from any of the other Goals. And I think that gives two things. One is that, yes, it can be applied in any context. I can see this being applied very directly and pastoralist and farming communities in Kenya living far away from the ocean. But also, we've just lived through and we're still going through the COVID pandemic. You can enter this from the health SDG and look at all the things that you have to do to really deal with health challenges in a broader perspective in a community in a broader setting. So it really has that that ability to be generalized.

And the key thing there is that, and I learned this as well working with fishing communities in Kenya, we often talk about "the community," but there's no single community. There are factions, there are different individuals, there are families and clans and different alliances. We can't just assume everybody agrees because they happen to be in a fishing community on the coast in Kenya. So this really helps bring different people with very different priorities into the conversation. They have to agree on the global vision, as Lisa pointed out. You may have to have a very broad umbrella in which to bring people to the table, or under which. But that's a start at least, that's something that we often don't have. And I think that's a very powerful part of the opportunity. And what I love about the circle, this circular depiction of the SDGs rather than the rectangles of squares, is that you bring in people from each of the 17 doors into the Room and they sit there and discuss their priorities and try and come up with a solution or solutions.

MCARTHUR: Zia, I'm curious, to bring your engineering hat to the table, as someone who's leading these innovation processes, this is a very different type of technology. This is a narrative technology for how we frame conversations and frame problems. I'm curious how you would distill how this fits into other efforts on things like the SDGs.

KHAN: Well, what I think is so remarkable about this effort is, first, anchoring it into oceans, which often doesn't have screaming headlines in the paper. But for these communities, if a fishery collapses, all of a sudden you've got SDG 1 poverty, SDG 3 health, and SDG 8 employment and livelihoods top of mind getting affected from it. So it's a great device to balance, both focusing on oceans, but linking it to the other SDGs that are most important to communities. So, I find that is really interesting.

And then just getting down to the individuals. And I really picked up, David on your comment around we talk about communities like they're a thing, but they're not really. And we talk about the private sector like it's a thing, but it's not. It's a bunch of companies. And even a company is not really a thing, it's a bunch of people. And somewhere there are two people who don't like each other, and who don't agree with the strategy, and it's all this messy business, which is what makes collaboration so hard. And that's something I'd love to explore now, which is you brought a Room of people together and you came up with this really novel idea and you're going to take practical steps next year. Could you describe for us a little bit of who was in the Room and how did those meetings go, how did they work, how did you come up with this idea, and how do you plan to drive it forward?

OBURA: Well, I'll be interested to hear Lisa's take on this because a lot of people that came into the Room, of course, I knew a little bit from various contexts and we chose them for their differences. And I was a bit afraid of that because I knew they were quite strong leaders in their fields, they're quite strong personalities in many cases, and they may not like each other either. I wasn't sure of all the professional interactions they might have had in the past.

And also, this is a very simple idea, it's not rocket science. It's just looking at the SDG something a little bit differently and suggesting, Hey, let's get people to talk about it as opposed to anything more complicated in a sense. So I was a little bit worried that there would be strong pushback, that this is too kindergarten to be able to go out and use it and things like that.

But I was really pleased. I think we had some really good interactions. We were spread around the world, so it was hard to find meeting times that really worked for everybody. But at the same time, we're all working virtually anyway. So in a sense, it was easier for this Room, perhaps, doing it this way then when we were all traveling and doing in person.

DREIER: Well, I loved the diversity of expertise in our Room, and I think that was one of the big assets. We had very deeply expert scientists; we had people that were involved in the global policy arena; and then we had also had people that are very much on the ground involved in sustainable ocean-based initiatives on the ground in communities, and they really brought us down to Earth. And so it was great to have both people that are plugged into all of the big dynamics that are going on and those that are really on the frontline community level. And there's such a richness and connecting that top and ground level that I think that was one of the beauties of the process.

I would echo Zia's comments about the way in which the SDG narrative framework is a little different from what some might see as a technology or a tool. And I think having been involved in many global initiatives, we tend to be attracted to a shiny new thing, a new technology, a big financial commitment, a new fix of some kind. And the Narrative Framework is really about investing in the connective tissue in a way. It's about telling the story better, spotlighting the things that matter, making connections stronger, making the system work better together. And I think that might be a little bit less glamorous and flashy, may be less in the headlines as you were saying, but it's really important in terms of supporting particularly the progress on the ground.

OBURA: Yeah, and if I could come in on that and bring this back to the people as well. So, Zia, you picked up on one of the key things I think is the power of this approach as well is that we also tend to focus on our priority, right? So I would focus on Goal 14 and what's happening in the oceans. But in fact, we realize in ocean science and conservation it's what happens everywhere else that affects the oceans. So the solutions are not in the ocean, the solutions are in people and on land and the economic systems. And a key part of this approach is not to focus on your own Goal, but to look through your priority interests to the other interests to see what are the interactions and how are we affecting one another and how do we identify synergies.

And I think that came out in the participants in the Room as well because they had different backgrounds and perspectives. There were also big picture thinkers interested in the connections and particularly how people interact with the environment and how you assure people are well taken care of, because I think if we can address that as a priority goal then the other things can line up if we agree on really pursuing that and addressing it from all the perspectives that it needs to be pursued from.

MCARTHUR: And one of the reasons Zia and I love this so much is, just to put a fine point on it, we're working on a process of 17 Rooms for the global Sustainable Development Goals, which come down to people getting together in rooms to have a conversation about how to cooperate. And

you're really talking about how to have one Room with all those people coming together into a single place to have a collective conversation within the community, which is a very powerful microcosm of the broader principle, I think. Curious, Lisa, having been involved in so many of these multi-stakeholder coalition-based conversations over the years, is there anything from this process that helps you think differently about broader processes, about what we can be doing better and what we can learn from this? Because we're always trying to bottle what we're learning through these conversations and curious what you see and what might be in an "aha" for you.

DREIER: I think for me, the 17 Rooms process affirmed a suspicion I already have, which is that some of the best innovations, conversations, and collaborations evolve in the informal space. I loved the fact that although this initiative is led by two very prominent, historic, prestigious institutions, it was with two leaders who have been very involved in -level global processes. You all made a very deliberate effort to make this an informal, flexible, and even fun process and really encouraged people to be relaxed, engaged, have new ideas, and made it a very low-stakes process for floating new ideas and sharing new things. And so I think you created an environment for innovation and collaboration that's quite unique in the global space.

And what I've seen over the past few decades being involved in these types of multi-stakeholder initiatives is that the formal and official institutions and initiatives are really, really important. And to keep them from getting too siloed and too inflexible, you also need to sort of complement them and challenge them and support them through these informal networks. And so I'm becoming more and more of a fan of these sort of informal, peer-driven collaboration networks that can draw in people, as our Room did—people that are very involved in large organizations, in official processes—but bring them into a Room into a context where they can connect to others, have new ideas, and take those new ideas back into their institutions. So I think it can be a really great way to sort of nourish and strengthen and support and accelerate the work of more official institutions through these kind of informal networks.

MCARTHUR: David, how does that resonate or align with your own experience?

OBURA: Oh, perfectly, because I'm very much an ecologist and a scientist, but I realize that we need to work in these large-scale policy processes. The ocean is large, and no single national system can really deal with the challenges that we face with the oceans. We have to deal in regional entities and global entities as well. And they have huge inertia, and they are set up through complex processes, and then once that set up, nobody likes to change that. And I really enjoyed the informality and the innovation that happens in informal settings through these lab processes.

So my question has been how to bring that into these more formal processes in African countries. And to some extent, using the 17 Rooms and the SDGs, it's a Trojan horse. You say it sounds very formal and you could bring it in and the governments say, Yes, it's great. Let's do that. We'll use that workshop. And then you come in and you try and break things apart with the informality. So now I see a lot of power to these processes. I'm very excited by it.

KHAN: Well, thank you both. I mean, it's such an interesting point. I spend a lot of time looking at organizations around the informal aspects of organizations, networks, ad hoc collaborations can help spark ideas. But the formal systems that allocate budget and resources are what bring it to scale in many ways. And John, you've made the interesting point about 17 Rooms being an alternate space for leaders who are in institutions and these big processes to work with different people, come up with different ideas, and then how do we bring it back there.

MCARTHUR: I think Lisa's point on stakes is interesting. I won't paraphrase you, Lisa, as saying UN meetings are anything less than fun. But, there is this question of creative mindset that people

might or might not bring into formal meetings where the official negotiations or deliberations happen because the risk in a public setting, and often public institutions have risk aversion for good reason. And that risk aversion of protecting taxpayer dollars or making sure things don't go wrong might not always give enough space to allow things to become right.

And one of the things we've talked a fair amount about in this 17 Rooms initiative is how do you tap into the creativity that's in the human spirit so frequently, but also plug into institutions that either can drive change through their existing scale or drive new approaches through a scale-up.

We're somewhat institution agnostic on those questions. There's no inherent winners or losers. But it is, I think, an untapped space for global cooperation right now, especially at a time where, as Zia and I have put it elsewhere, we feel like a lot of the official institutions are getting stuck because they're not able to self-update, as you put it, David. They get in their ways, they have their grooves for a certain reason. But then the world changes and they need new grooves. And we're trying to help different places create new grooves, whether it's in an existing institution or outside of it. David, you, I think, I have a thought on this.

OBURA: Yeah, thanks. On the point I was going to make on that about scaling up, is there's this huge disconnect between global and local and even between national and local in many cases, and the challenge of a revealing local experiences to these high levels of decision making to really inform that. It's a bit of a packaging process, to use the language of the 17 Goals, to be able to package many different people's and entities' experiences together and aggregate them. So really, to help that bottom-up process of people reaching from the local level—communities we've talked about—but also companies and other entities, cities, so to local government levels—and now local governments are using the SDGs more and more. And then from local governments to national government, because that helps them access resources that might be there in national or international processes to support actions around the Sustainable Development Goals. And so could we break out of this really harsh formula of the SDG indicators, for example, for assessing progress and generate some real bottom-up indicators that really show how people's lives are being transformed and aggregate those together within local and national contexts to share change.

DREIER: I'd love to follow up on John's comment about creativity and innovation in the way that 17 Rooms really encouraged that. I think one of the one of the things that I've seen repeatedly that is really echoed in 17 Rooms is that if you have a respected convener that can rally the trust of the stakeholders and also lend a sort of credibility to the convening, that gives you license to then explore new and informal and innovative ways of interacting. So we saw that many years ago working with John in the UN Millennium Project, which was 10 task forces. Each was multi-stakeholder. So that was 400 leading global development experts from around the world who had a mandate from the UN secretary-general to achieve a very ambitious set of work outcomes, but pursued that in a very creative, freewheeling, ambitious, unusual way. Then it was just extraordinary to see the combination of this sort of very official mandate and the explosion of sort of innovation and collaboration that came out of that.

Similarly, the World Economic Forum uses that very deliberately in Davos in bringing together global leaders in a deliberately informal and often very sort of provocative and creative set of interactions. And I would see heads of state and global CEOs be kind of shocked by that lack of protocol, lack of formality. And then within minutes, they would be absolutely embracing it and drawing on whiteboards and brainstorming together.

So I think people are really longing for this kind of opportunity to innovate and create together and creating a kind of safe and credible space for them to do that is a real gift, and I think that's one of the beauties of 17 Rooms.

KHAN: Well, David and Lisa, thank you so much for those comments. John and I often joke that while we are co-creating 17 Rooms with our teams along the way, all of the moderators are co-creating with us and inventing new tactics that we learn from and, frankly, decoding what is happening, which both of you have done really eloquently. I've learned a lot, and now I have new language to describe what's going on with 17 Rooms, which we still strongly believe is a powerful, powerful process, and we're always trying to make it as good as we can.

This has been such a fascinating conversation, but unfortunately we do need to bring it to a close. I'd like to ask each of you, given the narrative approach that you're taking with oceans and what you're trying to do next year, what is your aspiration for 2030 when you think about oceans and the SDGs? What would be one concrete part of the vision that you see for the world? And then what's one takeaway for the listener that you hope they learn and incorporate in what they do?

DREIER: I'd love to see, for the oceans, I'd love to see us find a way to really provide a megaphone to local communities to share their priorities and their needs and have the global community really be listening to that message. And for others that may be listening, I would say connect and collaborate. There's so many wonderful ideas and talents all around you, and so challenge yourself to find new people and new ideas to connect with to work on the Goals that you're working on.

OBURA: And from my side, and I'll pick up on that, and I'm working very much in the biodiversity and the climate space is right now, so for oceans by 2030, we need to be reducing our carbon dioxide emissions to meet the Paris Agreement—and not as much as we can, we just have to do it. And to do everything to reverse biodiversity loss and make sure that people's rights are really addressed and access to nature. So, I love that this process can really help apply a megaphone, as Lisa said, to that message, to get it out and to really get the local context heard so it's aggregated and applied around the world. And the take home for people listening is, what's your sustainability narrative? Everybody can do this for themselves—your household, your work—and then engage with those around you that you linked to in doing that and make it happen.

MCARTHUR: What a treat, Zia, to get this perspective from the bottom up need for change and opportunity for change and how to connect it with some of the more restricted and restrictive global conversations that also matter for so much of humanity. And it feels very consistent with our whole spirit of 17 Rooms of connecting with people where they are to help connect with other people that can make a difference, too. And we're so grateful, David and Lisa, for all your leadership in advancing not just Room 14, but our collective thinking about how different components of the SDG puzzle can fit together in new ways. And in the spirit of Occam's Razor, the best answer is often the simplest one, and a new narrative might be just such a great answer. So, thank you so much for what you're doing, and we can't wait to see where it goes next.

DREIER: Thank you both as well,

OBURA: Thank you. It's been a real pleasure to be part of the process.

KHAN: John, that was just a fascinating conversation, and one thing that I really took away was the importance of putting people in the middle. Sometimes the SDGs can look like these big global abstract statements, and people find it hard to see how they fit into it. But what they were describing was a process by which people who live near oceans can connect it to their jobs, what they eat, their health, and make it very relevant to them. And I think that's something that we can draw upon in some of the other Rooms, frankly, of how to make the targeted connections to a few other high-priority SDGs.

MCARTHUR: I was struck by a few dualities that came out of it. There was this duality between a global framework as a helpful device for tackling local conversations that, in turn, take a perspective on a single issue like oceans, but mix them with another duality of all the other issues that intersect with the oceans. And then there's a third big one, which is this duality and interrelationship between formal and informal and the need for the creativity that can be sparked through informal processes. The other duality that struck me was this one between informal and formal, and the need to have, because we're all humans, informal processes that sparked that creativity and allow us to take risks or float ideas, but also the ability to plug into the formal conversations, the formal institutions, and even this notion of having a convener that people might respect—that's you in this instance, Zia—that creates some space for people to do things that might feel a little riskier than what they would be comfortable to do in a more formal setting.

So all these dualities are part of this healthy set of tensions I think we're navigating in 17 Rooms. And part of why I'm so excited to see how they continue to evolve it in 2022 for the oceans, but for the SDGs more broadly.

Well, to learn more, find this episode at [Brookings.edu/17roomspodcast](https://www.brookings.edu/17roomspodcast). Coming up next, Room 16 with Elizabeth Anderson and Sarah Mendelson on human rights, accountable COVID-19 relief, and recovery efforts to reduce inequality and increase access to justice. We'll see you next time.

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 Reboredo, 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.

The 17 Rooms initiative is co-chaired by Zia Khan of The Rockefeller Foundation and me, John McArthur of the Center for Sustainable Development at The Brookings Institution. The Rockefeller Foundation generously provides support for the 17 Rooms initiative. All views expressed during this episode were solely those of the speakers.