The Brookings Institution
Center for Sustainable Development

and

The Rockefeller Foundation

17 Rooms Podcast
"Advancing best practices for COVID-19 relief and recovery packages"
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Episode Summary:

In this twelfth interview of the "17 Rooms" podcast, Elizabeth Andersen and Sarah
Mendelson discuss bridging local, national, and global layers of action to assess and
foster accountable COVID relief and recovery efforts that reduce inequalities and
increase access to justice. Andersen, executive director at the World Justice Project
and Mendelson, professor at Carnegie Mellon University, moderated Room 16
focused on Sustainable Development Goal number 16—on peace, justice, and strong
Institutions—during the 2021 17 Rooms flagship process.

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

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

MCARTHUR: Zia, I have these days where I read the news, and I see all the things that are unjust. And I think back to the fact that there was a time when I was younger, I almost became a lawyer, I almost went to law school. And instead, I ended up making the decision— maybe a good one, maybe a bad one—to become an economist instead. But when I think about what's going on in the world right now and the quest for justice and the challenges we're facing, we spend so much time beating up on lawyers in our society, and every so often I think thank goodness for the lawyers who are fighting the good fight because there's a lot of cases out there that need some forward movement.

KHAN: Well, you know, John, I studied fluid dynamics, which had nothing to do with people or rights, but I certainly came to it in the work that I did and the work obviously, that we do at The Rockefeller Foundation. And it's been something I think we've taken for granted a little bit in the past as people who've been working on these issues, and we're looking at a fundamental rethink now. And I think people are not only rethinking their issues, but they're also rethinking how they personally are approaching these issues.

MCARTHUR: It's part of why I'm so interested in today's conversation because there's so much happening in the world that requires a bit of a rethink on what is justice, who's justice for, who gets justice, what institutions deliver justice. And we've had everything from the pandemic showing what justice might not look like to what it can look like. And we're going to have two people today who've spent much of their career and their professional lives fighting for different forms of justice, democracy and good institutions around the world.

Specifically, we'll be joined today by Elizabeth Anderson—or Betsy Anderson—and Ambassador Sarah Mendelson to learn about their efforts to bridge local, national, and global layers of action to assess and foster accountable COVID relief and recovery efforts that reduce inequalities and increase access to justice. Betsy is an expert in international human rights law, international criminal law, and transitional justice. She was the director of the American Bar Association Rule of Law Initiative, prior to joining the World Justice Project, which she now leads.

Sarah is both a practitioner and a scholar. She served as the U.S. representative to the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations, a formal ambassadorial appointment, until 2017, and currently teaches at Carnegie Mellon University, where she heads Heinz College in D.C. Betsy and Sarah co-moderate Room 16, a working group for Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions in this year's 17 Rooms process.

For new listeners, 17 Rooms is an approach to spurring action for the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs. It convenes 17 working groups, one per SDG, and asks them to focus on an area within a Goal that is ripe for action and to define some concrete next steps that can be achieved in 12 to 18 months to make a difference. Zia?

KHAN: Thanks, John. Peace, justice, rights—these are all such big, heady issues, and it's really fascinating to hear from two thoughtful people their personal journeys and how their personal journeys have intersected. It's going to be a fascinating conversation.

MCARTHUR: Betsy, Sarah, welcome to 17 Rooms, podcast edition. Zia, let's dive in.

KHAN: Sounds good. Welcome again, Betsy and Sarah. You know, the first question we like to ask, folks, is how did you get here? You know, you've had such long, storied careers, each of you have been fellow travelers. Just your story, how you got involved in this work, and then how do you get connected and involved with 17 Rooms? Maybe, Betsy, we could start with you.

ANDERSEN: Great, well, thanks so much for having us. And I think the answer to this question is two parts. One is a personal journey for each of us, and then there's a Betsy and Sarah story. So maybe I'll start with my personal journey. I have been working in the human rights field for 25 years in a variety of roles. And over that time, I have become increasingly convinced that rights needs to be approached holistically in a way that integrates civil and political rights advocacy with the advancement of social and economic development rights. And it's really a development approach to advancing rights, which is very much reflected in the SDGs and the incorporation of Goal 16 in particular, and the 16+ agenda that integrates that with all the other Goals. So this this work around the SDGs and the opportunity to advance it through the 17 Rooms has been a natural and exciting development in my personal journey. Sarah, over to you.

MENDELSON: Thanks so much for having us. So, I started as a Russia scholar and political scientist, Sovietologist actually, and became very focused on the democracy effort in Russia in the mid-'90s, human rights. And then, after Mr. Putin came to power over 20 years ago, increasingly focused on human rights issues.

But at about 2006, like a few of my colleagues, we realized that the democracy journey for Russia was going to be probably longer than our professional lifetimes and that we needed to broaden our book of business. And that's really the first time I started looking internally, domestically, at the U.S., pulling Betsy with me looking at how to close Guantanamo.

But the big jump really towards the SDGs came probably from four years serving at USAID and then a year, three months, five days serving at U.S.-UN. I was part of the U.S. delegation that was creating the SDGs. I was the interagency lead for what would become SDG 16. It was actually two separate goals at the time.

And then, I think my experience serving as the U.S. ambassador to ECOSOC, that ECOSOC part really has a lot of resonance for me. The economic and social issues, social rights that I think previously I had not as much emphasized, right. If you're coming from a global north perspective working in Europe and Eurasia, the focus was really on freedom from torture, detention, much less of a focus on the economic and social rights. In a lot of ways it was, I would say, a hangover from the Cold War. And so in a quest to get post-Cold War, the SDGs are perfect, particularly because they apply everywhere. Development happens everywhere. And so that that enabled it. But it is part of the Betsy and Sarah journey.

So, the Betsy and Sarah story begins in about 1999 in the Europe-Eurasia division of Human Rights Watch. And Betsy was running that group, and they asked me to join the advisory

committee. And it was a pretty active advisory committee at the time and a lot of old human rights hands, people who had been, I think, at the creation of Human Rights Watch. And of course, let's give a shout out to The Rockefeller Foundation because Human Rights Watch, which began as Helsinki Watch, really emerged from a meeting at the Bellagio Center. So it's one of the great origin stories.

So, at the time, we were very focused on the war in Chechnya and human rights abuses. And Betsy was very open to a strategy that I wanted to pursue, which was using public opinion data to work with human rights activists to actually listen and respond to how human beings in their communities thought about issues, rather than telling them what was important about particular human rights. And it turned out, for example, that Russians were very upset about the war in Chechnya. They, like Americans, were really focused on the cost of casualties and the costs of war. But the human rights activists wanted to only talk about the abuse by the military.

And so long story short, we were collaborating on strategic communications and using data. The journey then went to trying to close Guantanamo. And this is about 2007, 2008. Both the Republicans and the Democrats—Senator McCain, Senator Obama at the time, President Bush—everybody wanted to close Guantanamo. And so we started a nonpartisan task force to work our way through it. In the end, it ended up being really the backbone for the executive order that President Obama signed in early days.

We also did some collaboration around sexual abuse of peacekeepers. Working in part with the Finnish embassy, Ambassador Zeid, who had served as a special rapporteur or secretary general special rapporteur on the issue. These are ongoing issues. The UN confronts sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping operations to this day.

But, Betsy is the Harvey Keitel of NGOs. She's the cleaner. She comes in and she can take an NGO and really up its game. And she's a strategic thinker. So, when the opportunity came to co-moderate, Betsy was an obvious go-to for me. But I think she and I are also on a common journey that a lot of us in the human rights community are on that is looking at the socioeconomic issues, is focusing more on the United States, particularly in the post-2020 era and COVID. Betsey, anything you want to add?

ANDERSEN: I would just reflect on the fact that over that 20 years, you and I have repeatedly pulled each other into each other's organizations and initiatives. And one more recent example of that was in 2019, when I was then, as I am now, at the World Justice Project and putting together the World Justice Forum and knowing the interesting work that you were doing on Cohort 2030 and wanting to bring those youthful voices and perspectives to the forum, Sarah came and put on a terrific program there.

I had forgotten about that early work we did on polling and surveying and getting a people-centered approach to the work in Russia. And I have to credit you with really introducing me to that work and the power of those approaches that now animate her work at the World Justice Project and show up in our Room 16 work this year where we're really focused on elevating local voice to advance just recovery. So, those threads run through. It's been a great journey and will continue, I'm sure.

KHAN: You know, I'm curious, you referenced Russia, which is maybe a place that when people think about rights and justice says, okay, yeah, we can understand the focus there. But

both of you also mentioned the U.S. And I think that to the layperson comes as a bit of a recent surprise, that when we're talking about rights and what we're talking about justice issues that it would apply in and there's work to be done here in the U.S., particularly when you think about the global context. I'm curious about how you're experiencing that. You know, is this something that deep experts like yourselves have always known, that this is an important area of focus? Have you sensed the shift in how experts are thinking about this? How does that map to what people are hearing in the media, et cetera? But if you could comment on this notion that a country that used to and usually does think of itself as a leader on these issues is now realizing to some degree that there's work to be done here.

MCARTHUR: And maybe, Zia, I'd just even add on that. I'm curious, Betsy and Sarah, human rights has often been an "over there" topic. "Civil rights" has been an "over here" question. Are we talking about a merger or are they different? How does this all fit together and what is Sustainable Development Goal 16 have to do with it?

ANDERSEN: Well, from a legal perspective, there is a distinction. Civil rights in U.S. jurisprudence is grounded in our Constitution and applied by our courts. But that can be and often is infused and inspired by international human rights norms and standards and treaties. And so, increasingly there is an integration in the law of those ideas and that jurisprudence. But beyond that, politically and in terms of advocacy approaches, and just empirically, what we see there is even more commonality in terms of the kinds of rights issues that are evident in the United States and that we're also working around the world. That's been very much a focus of our discussions in Room 16 this year.

MENDELSON: So, for me again, you know, on this Russia piece, I was working on historical memory, right. And as far back as 2009, when I helped organize a civil society summit in Moscow to which President Obama came, coming out of that meeting we had a working group that we wanted to look at historical memory in the U.S. and in Russia. This was bringing Americans who worked on the U.S. together with Russians who worked on Russia. For us, the historical memory had to do with our slave past and coming to terms, understanding this. There was a lot of resistance by Americans and Russians to do this.

Fast forward to 2016. The SDGs had already been adopted. At U.S.-UN, I told my team, SDG 16 it's going to be a way also of talking about historical memory, which a lot of the team didn't, they were like, What? What are you talking about? That's not it at all. We went so far as to organize a meeting where we were going to have the president of Georgetown University and the producers of "Underground" come and talk about efforts to address our slave past. It actually got turned off very high up at the White House. This was going to be an event to happen after the election. I haven't talked about this publicly. But it is one of these instances where you're trying to move the needle and it's very difficult. 2020 happens, and it's intolerable. You can't not talk about what's going on in this country. And so in our discussions that Betsy was in last summer, 2020, and certainly this summer, if we're going to be talking about not only the SDGs but the issue of rights, we have to also be addressing what's going on in this country.

MCARTHUR: Maybe just to dive into your Room, then, you mentioned the conversations in Room 16, which focuses on the big picture of SDG 16. You and your colleagues in the Room have really focused in on this issue of transparency and COVID-19 recovery packages. Of all the things going on in the world and all the extraordinary range of topics you just touched on—and of course, there's so many more, many parts of the world that didn't even come up in

all the major things you just discussed—why did you pick this as a right next step for the Room to focus in on? Sarah?

MENDELSON: You know, I think that the decisions, the journey, the conversations that a Room picks reflect who comes into that Room and who's chosen to come into the Room, right? And we had the head of the Open Government Partnership in that Room, right? So, their focus is very much on transparency, accountability, a 21st-century way of addressing corruption. And we recognized early on that we're talking about trillions of dollars around the world because of the COVID relief and recovery packages, the largest amounts of money that governments were spending since World War II. So, this was either going to be an opportunity for just recovery or unjust recovery. This was either a moment where we could put in place new systems to be able to track, trace, and understand where the money was going to, the decision-making process behind which the money is flowing or not.

And we initially wanted to do a big global campaign, and then with some perhaps nudging from Brookings and Rockefeller I think we got a little bit more practical. And the result is we're doing essentially both. We are looking much more at a global level. But we have deep dives into Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Toronto, and some work in L.A. as well, which we can talk about in a second. Betsy?

ANDERSEN: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. And what we saw was not only an important effort to ensure accountable spending of these resources, but that we could realize the transformative potential of them to address the longstanding rights issues, and not just recover, but rebound to a better and brighter future.

So, that was what we were motivated to advance, and at the same time our Room 16 and those of us working on SDG 16 globally have made important progress over the last several years, elevating justice as an important development objective and garnering commitments at the highest levels, developing new indicators for the SDG process, and so on.

And yet we are not seeing at the local level, in ways that affect people's lives, new policies and approaches implemented. And so we wanted not just to be promoting these ideas at global conferences and statements and the like, but to begin to dive into some localities. And we're looking at a handful in North America, and colleagues around the world are looking in other jurisdictions, at the local level what's working, what's not, and why? And, how can we advocate new approaches to begin to fill the gaps that we identified?

KHAN: And, Betsy, if I could jump in for a moment. I find this super exciting and I think about Opportunity Zones when that was launched to great fanfare. And it was true, they turned out to be huge opportunity zones, but not opportunities for the people that we thought there would be opportunities for. And there was some visibility and transparency created around what was happening, but I'm not sure there was any kind of course correction in terms of changes. And I'm curious, as you work into these localities, it would be fascinating to hear a little bit more about how you expect to play out at the local level. But what happens once that transparency is created? Maybe there is a problem that's spotted. What are the corrective actions that you're envisioning?

MENDELSON: So, part of what we're doing is we're actually taking very seriously, "Leave No One Behind," and we're taking very seriously work that John McArthur has done with Krista Rasmussen in creating a methodological framework that translates the SDGs in a given

context to understand progress or the lack of progress. And we're doing it in a couple of different ways.

And I should also note a common theme in our Room, and I think it ran through a lot of Rooms, was the need for data, but also for us a kind of antipathy towards aggregated data, that aggregated data doesn't give you the story of what is going on in communities and with specific people. If you really want to take Leave No One Behind, you have to have disaggregated data in a number of different ways—race, gender, demographic, age.

So, what we want to also do, though, is compare if we're looking at open data sets, we're looking at creating proxy SDG targets for those to understand. We're looking at following the money, but we're looking at local voice. So, we want to compare the open data sets, but also in-depth interviews with representatives from local communities who can tell us what were the social justice needs prior to COVID? What's going on now? To what extent have these COVID relief and recovery packages had an impact? To what extent are these local communities, does the data reflect what is going on with them? Do they trust the data? Are they involved in the data collection?

And then we're going to be comparing what also local government officials are saying. We want to close feedback loops when we have results and share them back with both the local community and the local stakeholders. But we're going to use Betsy's World Justice Forum as a workshop to bring students, university partners, and local leaders to The Hague and really do a day-and-a-half, two-day deep dive into what's going on. In that case, we really want to elevate the local voice. And of course we're going to be at a convening with thousands of other people from around the world. So, there's going to be lots of lessons learned from there. And I should say this is all both with support from the World Justice Project enabling us a space, but also the Packard Foundation and of course, The Rockefeller Foundation.

ANDERSEN: And then just to elaborate and bring in some of the other actors in our Room and how we're looking to realize the synergies in all of our approaches. So, the Open Government Partnership process, of course, generates commitments by jurisdictions, national but increasingly local jurisdictions. That's where a lot of the action is and they've got a whole prong of their activity that is around open justice. And we hope that some of the learning and best practices that we garner from Sarah's work can feed into the kinds of commitments and action plans that OGP promotes. Similarly, the pathfinders for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies in our Room, they have a justice action coalition bringing together a number of governments and intergovernmental organizations to advance this agenda. And so is another vector, if you will, for us to disseminate the best practices that come out of these deep dives and to promote replication in other contexts.

So, we're pretty excited, a lot of work to do. The World Justice Forum, as Sarah mentioned, is going to be an important meeting place halfway through 2022 for us to check in. We hope it will be itself an action forcing event and also generative of follow on activity.

MCARTHUR: Curious just to dive into these case studies that your Room is pushing on—Toronto and Pittsburgh, for example. Zia and I both grew up in Canada, we're very happy for Toronto always, I think, to be included. But, it's interesting when we look at the data—you've talked about the $17 trillion, I think, is the global response that's been put into this fiscal actions around the world. There is some evidence that poverty has gone down in some places because of this massive fiscal response. Some would argue it's things government should

have been doing all along. But how does that reconcile with this justice question in terms of how people are doing? Maybe someone's skimming off the top, but if poverty is going down, is that just a short term thing? Is it is that the concern or is it about who's poverty is going down? Help us understand, maybe just for Pittsburgh and Toronto, the types of questions that are really in here.

MENDELSON: We're still early days. I can tell you that the summer work has been really trying to excavate where the open data sets are and what are they telling us. We'll know a lot more by May. At this point, what we're seeing is huge jumps in food insecurity, jumps in domestic violence, and a lack of tech transfer from overseas domestically. So, if you have best practices, for example, in addressing food insecurity, cash transfer, that is not at all what's going on in North America. In the Trump administration they had a policy, Farmers to Families, so you show up at the food bank and what do you find? This week you find onions, lots of onions. Next week you find lots of apples. But it's not demand driven.

And the conversation that we had repeatedly in the Room—and our group met a lot in during the summer—was the need for this human-centered data ecosystem. We need to know what the local demand is. The best policies are demand driven and that would apply in Pittsburgh or Pretoria. That's the gold standard. But we're not seeing it. And if we're not seeing it necessarily in Pittsburgh or L.A. or Atlanta or Toronto, then we've really got some work to do.

So a little bit "answer cloudy, ask later," John, in terms of what exactly are we finding because we're still really early days. But we are finding even in Canada, which is much better in terms of data collection, I would say, than in many parts of the United States, we still are having trouble finding some disaggregated data, particularly for indigenous populations.

MCARTHUR: All the questions Sarah just raised around demand driven, what works for the community, I think those are probably questions that you and I in the global development space have been talking about with colleagues for a long, long time. I'm curious, Zia, where's your head on this in terms of what's local, what's global, what's just, you know, a basic question we should always be asking?

KHAN: Well, data has come up in so many of the 17 Rooms. And I think everyone is seeing its unbelievable potential to unlock the intentions of programs with what's really happening. And then how do we create the closed, tighter feedback loop that is more weeks and months rather than years to fix that.

And, food insecurity is something that we've been monitoring, and it's really just the breakdown at very tactical levels that happens. And people think that this is an issue just in the social sector. But we're seeing this with global supply chains, where we are right now in the economy recovering from COVID, you know, things aren't moving. It has to do with just very tactical things like how many containers can you stack in the Port of Los Angeles. And what are the regulations of how you can do them, and you just need all that information.

What this conversation's making me curious about, is how much of this fixing existing broken data systems, getting access to data? Or do we need to leapfrog to a whole new approach? So, for example, we've been looking at a lot of satellite imagery data when it comes to crop yield performance in sub-Saharan Africa, where we get much better resolution, much more timely resolution by using satellites than other mechanisms. So, I'm curious

around, at the local level, are there there innovations in technique around data that you're seeing that help sort of feed this engine that you're creating of the feedback loop? Or is it, like, well, the mechanisms for getting the data are there, they're pretty good, and we just need to fix them?

ANDERSEN: Well, we at WJP over the last year have carried out a series of consultations with over 100 different data producers and users in different jurisdictions around the world, both here in the U.S. and in other places, to get a handle on this and to really understand what are the data gaps and how do we plug them.

And I think there are a couple of things. One, I think there is opportunity to leapfrog and take advantage of new technology and bring new data to bear. There also is some pretty low tech approaches that need to be scaled, and we've been doing some of this work at WJP in using justice needs surveys of households to understand how people experience their everyday justice problems and how they solve them, and to do that at a disaggregated level geographically, demographically, in order to really understand what's going on from a bottom up standpoint. And then third is collaboration. So, there's a lot of data out there, but it's siloed in different governments, different jurisdictions, different agencies, and in civil society, in academia. And there's distrust and there's lack of sharing and there's lack of compatibility.

So, we have been developing some initiatives to work with different jurisdictions to understand what are the key indicators you need in this space? Where are the datasets? How do we build a dashboard for you and then populate it from these different sources in a way that you will have confidence—policymakers—and be able to really act on that data? In some ways, it's not so much a shortage of data, but a lack of coordination and analysis and use of data. And that's where the challenge lies, I think, and the action, I hope over the next year or two will be. But Sarah, interested in your thoughts on that.

MENDELSON: What we're seeing is enormously ad hoc arrangements in a number of cities to collect data, that this is a political issue, this isn't really about technology. Mayors' offices for a variety of reasons have not prioritized this. So, for example, in Pittsburgh, I had a student who actually wrote the first voluntary local review for Pittsburgh, and for years had said to Mayor Peduto, We need a data analyst in the mayor's office. And instead, Carnegie Mellon was basically, together with the University of Pittsburgh, subbing for that. Mayor Garcetti in L.A., who has had a long devotion to the SDGs, together with the Hilton Foundation have created using Occidental students using ASU students, USC students, a lot of data sets. But again, it's a bit ad hoc. It's relying on students to pull together these data sets.

So, I feel like we probably need to have a more organized way of doing this. And I look forward to collaborating with Carnegie Mellon colleagues to understand the role of new and different technologies. But these low tech and political issues also need to be addressed.

KHAN: John, I'm really curious, you spend so much of your time professionally at The Brookings Institution, and I suspect personally as a hobby, looking at data at like this macro global SDG level. And when you think about, you know, the gap between what's happening globally, what's happening locally, what thoughts does this spark for you?

MCARTHUR: Well, we've talked about this—Betsy, and Sarah, and I talked about it over the course of the Room journey in recent weeks, and how to think about what's a problem that's specific to the issues they're working on and what's a bigger picture problem. And the

reality is, we did a study a few years ago trying to see how many people-centric goals could we look at trends around the world of these Sustainable Development Goals. And I think there's only about two dozen indicators that we could look at any serious time series around the world for all of the Goals in terms of issues that affect people. So, there is a big, big need for better data. And I think there is a need for lots of leapfrogging for different forms of data, whether it's government data, commercial data, satellite data is often commercially generated. Sometimes it's not.

But there's another bit that I'm finding so interesting here, which is this merger of communities, which is pretty interesting for 17 Rooms, because maybe one way I'd paraphrase what Betsy and Sarah have been talking about, it's almost like the lawyers and the data scientists need to get together. And it reminds me of a conversation we had in this series with Room 12, where they're talking about the journalists and the data scientists getting together and what a big breakthrough that's been, the need for more on the business journalism side.

I'm curious just on this notion of getting people together, and bringing it back to 17 Rooms, you mentioned, Sarah, that people came together quite a bit in this process. And obviously Room 16 is one of 17 rooms. Why do people come here? We're trying to figure out what is the thing to bottle here that is helpful for others and why do you think people come to Room 16? What does it add?

MENDELSON: Well, there's an element of community and a network we haven't talked enough about in this conversation but played a big role in our meetings. And that is the role that universities are playing as very stable platforms for advancing the SDGs. A couple of years ago, when I was thinking about Cohort 2030 or the next generation that has the most to gain or lose from what we're able to achieve by 2030, I was thinking that the ecosystem was mayors and universities and youth and private sector, and that was all pretty complicated. And so I was narrowing it more to mayors and universities. Mayors' offices are not the most stable platforms these days. Even in the time that we were working, Pittsburgh turned over, Atlanta turned over, we've recently gone through an election in Canada, and I'm happy to say that the representative for the Uni-Rosedale Riding is still the same. So that's good. Mayor Garcetti presumably will be moving on as ambassador to India. So, the university piece was really big.

A community of practice has emerged as a really important agreement, something that we are aspiring to, something that we're creating and really trying to think about how do we teach and partner with the next generation in a new and different way. I mean, the SDGs are not the easiest thing to either translate or teach. But once you get your head around this very interconnected set of Goals, it's hard to stop seeing it everywhere. But teaching it, you need to experience it. So, experiential learning is emerging as really important. And so throughout the year 2021, 2022, we have a group of students and university partners that will be coming together and thinking through what works and what doesn't work.

And of course, we have a lot of human rights advocates in the Room, longtime nonprofit NGO leaders like Betsy and others who are part of this larger community. I mean, if you have the universities and the students in the middle, they're presumably going to go out and be the workforce that are trained in these new, different ways of working, using data, and then populating, whether it's working again in Pittsburgh or Pretoria, these different kinds of skills and really bringing the SDGs to life.

MCARTHUR: I'm really curious on this point on all these people coming together, Sarah was almost describing Room 16 as a hub for all these networks. How do you see it? Why spend time here?

ANDERSEN: It's really been a great resource for me, the 17 Rooms process. This is the fourth year that I've participated and I've just been delighted to do so. And it's hard to really describe what the secret sauce is. I think Rockefeller and Brookings have powerful convening authority. So it's really, from a co-chairs' perspective, it's really wonderful to reach out to senior busy people from all over the world with an email saying, join something more, let me add another thing to your plate, and have everybody say "yes." And then to be able to bring that group together over a series of meetings to catch up on what each other is doing to identify synergies, gaps, and to co-create something together. It's intellectually stimulating. It's professionally gratifying and advancing. I think we're changing the world. So, that's why most of us get into this work, and this is a process that I have seen repeatedly over four years make stuff happen in concrete ways.

MCARTHUR: Yeah, I'm worried that we might be extracting too much praise here, which is not our goal, and that's where you always have the penetrating question. I really think it's so interesting what Betsy and Sarah describing of these various people—they're reframing a problem, they're reframing coalitions, they're reframing, reframing. But there's got to be something ugly under the hood that we have to figure out in terms of what's what makes it hard. What do you think?

MENDELSON: Part of the reason why it has been, I think, psychologically helpful to gather is also the reason why in the larger world, it's very difficult. We still are in a communications crisis around the SDGs in the sense of most people don't know this agenda exists. The way in which the world communicates about the SDGs are through voluntary reviews. The good news is over 200 voluntary national reviews have been issued. The bad news is to date, the United States has not done one. What has happened is, again, there are a lot of cities that have emerged. But even in places where you would expect this conversation to be very natural, we see some hesitancy.

So, to the extent that the SDGs become a fluent speech for the world's population—and here I think we're really looking to the next generation, they in a lot of ways not intuitively get it, but there's so many issues that they seem to be motivated by that are reflected happily in this global framework that we've all agreed to. So, I think it's less of an issue for 17 Rooms and one for all of us is both, how do we up the game so that the SDGs become not some weird niche thing, certainly not some U.N. thing, but they actually live everywhere and that they're understood as a real paradigm shift , that development happens everywhere. I'm in Ward 3 in Washington, D.C., and parts of Ward 8 and Ward 5 in Washington, D.C. the life expectancy for men of color is lower than in countries that the World Bank classifies as developing, you know. So, there's paradigms that need to be disrupted and the SDGs can help us.

The other thing is that in a lot of other Rooms, professionally the SDGs are well-known. If you look at 13 on climate, there's not a climate scientist out there who doesn't know something about sustainability and something about the SDGs. We have a much harder task in Room 16. The human rights community is still quite suspicious about sustainable development, about development in general. So, it's not only that we have a general population issue and a political issue—you know, when will the Biden administration

robustly engage across the board domestically and international?—but we have in our own professional networks some coming together. And there are conversations in the Room where it's not hand-wringing, but we're noting that we still have issues, particularly among the really big, internationally known human rights organizations.

MCARTHUR: Zia, what do you make of all this?

KHAN: It's so interesting, I think among all of us here, I'm the most recent newcomer to the SDGs. And coming from the private sector, I remember looking at them and thinking, these don't make any sense. Analytically, these indicators are overlapping, they're at different levels. And what has occurred to me over time has been it's more about creating the framework for action. The goals are a call to action for groups of people to come together and wrestle these things down. And too often, I think there's a thought that these are just technical problems, particularly when it comes to data, and people don't fully appreciate that data itself is very social and very political. And how do these different groups come together to get something done? And everyone will say, we talked about lawyers talking to data scientists. Has anyone ever been in a conversation with a lawyer and a data scientist? It's not automatic how they each use the word "prototype," is almost comical to listen to them.

But what I'm so excited about, and Sarah and Betsy you guys are so exemplary of this, of committed leaders who know they have to work with people, who want to work with people, get those people together, find something practical to do, and that concrete action is so energizing for those teams. And I think so differentiating around what we hope 17 Rooms can provide, recognizing we still got things to figure out.

And along those lines, I'm curious if both of you could reflect on what's going to be so exciting about 2022 in terms of actions and next steps, like what are you really energized to see happen there? And then, John, I'd love to hear your perspective on having been someone who's seen so many actions come out of different SDG conversations how that feels to you? Maybe, Betsy, we could start with you.

ANDERSEN: Sure. Well, somewhat selfishly, I'm hoping that this whole community will come to the World Justice Forum in May, June, and that we will see both really concrete learning coming out of the research that Sarah has been leading and others have been contributing to. And then commitments from a variety of actors, government actors, private sector actors, to take that learning and to undertake initiatives to act on it, to move in their sphere of influence toward a more just recovery. And that we are able to report that back to the next 17 Rooms and beyond.

MENDELSON: We're at the not the beginning beginning, but the pretty near the beginning of the beginning of our story in terms of the research. So, what I'm excited about in 2022 is understanding the story that the data actually tell in these different cities. But also the consolidation of some of the partnerships, both in terms of the university work with students, understanding by this time next year what a community of practice really looks like and how we might scale it. What is the right scale? What's too much? What's what are the ingredients? But also really understanding what works in terms of these feedback loops and having the local leaders.

I will say that Pittsburgh is a kind of extraordinary place—Pittsburgh is almost like the new Russia for me, right? I can't go to Russia anymore, but Pittsburgh is this incredible lab. And

what I find is there are a lot of nonprofit leaders who actually are fluent in the SDGs. This has been over a couple of years that they've really engaged. They're finding value-add. And it's going to be interesting to me to see, do we find that in Atlanta? Do we find that in Toronto? And when we get to The Hague, to what extent are people able to meet people from other cities and compare notes? And my sense is at the moment we're seeing more of an unjust recovery than a just recovery. It would be great if we are able to uncover policy recommendations that can nudge us more towards that just recovery.

ANDERSEN: And maybe while we're throwing wishes for '22 out there, let me just add in that I'd love to see in '22, I know Sarah would too, a Biden administration commitment and action taking this SDG agenda seriously, not only in its work globally and its development, but also for the domestic agenda and the domestic work that is so needed and that we get a voluntary national review from the U.S. that that that really takes this agenda seriously.

MCARTHUR: You know, Zia, I'm reflecting on the human aspect of this that keeps coming up. As the economist in the room, I'm always trying to see what's the data, what's the outcome, what's the tell, how do we know something happened. And there's clearly a lot of that in here. And part of what this group is asking for is a more real-time assessment of how it's going, so we don't just have to wait until 2030 to find out how we're doing in this recovery process in 2022, which is often how it works with these economic assessments of who got what.

But there's another bit here which I think, and I know we have to wrap in a sec, this is really about movement building is the sense I'm getting, because we're really talking about a new frame, a new way of understanding, new forms of collaboration. We do need those lawyers and data scientists to know how to have that meeting together. But it's beyond the court case, which gets everyone's attention, has a binary outcome. It's beyond the legal change which might or might not take effect. It's beyond these binaries to really thinking about a collection of issues and a collation of new thoughts on how this pursuit of justice can move forward. And I have to say I'm so grateful, Betsy and Sarah, for all that you've taught me and how these Goals, Goal 16 but the SDGs more broadly, it seems they've been a device for advancing a conversation, but not completely and not without skeptics. As you've said, a lot of people still need to be convinced, but it seems like there is a movement afoot, and this is the type of thing that merits a doubling down, to capture a phrase we've used before.

MENDELSON: Yes on movement building and also field building. This is really creating a field of study and action that requires training and research and direct action differently than we've done it before. And I think that that's what is animating to a lot of people in the Room. And it's not easy. There is some strategic patience that's involved as in any kind of paradigm shift, in any kind of field building. But I think that's where we're headed.

ANDERSEN: I couldn't agree more, and I think it's actually it's actually essential. Going back to our roots, Sarah's and mine, as human rights activists and advocates, the traditional human rights movement is stuck. We need new approaches, we need new partnership, and the SDGs and this process specifically provide that for us.

KHAN: Well, Betsy and Sarah, I can't thank you enough for your work in 17 Rooms and for joining us in this podcast. I think rights and justice sometimes can feel like something that's stuck, and we're all about trying to get things unstuck. And I'm just so excited for the action that came out of your Room and to see what will happen in 2022. It's been great.

MCARTHUR: Zia, when I reflect on the conversation we just had, it's remarkable to step back and think, these are age old questions of justice, rights, individual rights, good institutions. It's like the entire field is going through an essential updating and overhaul for a new generation to take it on.

KHAN: And John, what would Betsy and Sarah shared was so interesting to me about the role of universities here, not only in providing the ideas for these re-energized movements that you're referencing, but to bring in young people who have the energy, and the freshness and frankly, the interest in the long term to focus on driving these movements forward.

MCARTHUR: It's incredible what can take place in just a short number of years.

Well, to learn more, find this episode at Brookings Dot Edu Slash 17 Rooms podcast. Coming up next, Room 11 with Jamie Drummond and Kennedy Odede on shifts in power process and funding towards localization.

I'm John McArthur.

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