



**The Brookings Institution
Center for Sustainable Development**

and

The Rockefeller Foundation

**17 Rooms Podcast
“What we learned about 17 Rooms and growing the community”
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Episode Summary:

In this final episode of the “17 Rooms” podcast, co-hosts John McArthur and Zia Khan distill what they learned from the show’s guests about what makes the 17 Rooms process actually work and how other communities can use 17 Rooms approaches to make concrete progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

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

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

In this final episode, John, I will distill what we learned as some key lessons from the conversations we had with co moderators in these podcasts to help us learn about what is it that actually makes 17 Rooms work. And as we learn these lessons we believe that others can draw from them, which is really encouraging because we think of how many more institutions and communities can take a 17 Rooms like approach to attack the world's greatest challenges and make concrete progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

MCARTHUR: Zia, this has been such an incredible journey in the podcast world for you and I, as we conclude this first season of talking with all the flagship moderators. We learned so much through the conversations. But I think we've also learned a lot about our own work. We've learned a lot about the different perspectives that people bring to the process and to their own work and how it interacts with your and my efforts and our own team's efforts. And a lot of it comes down to how do we think about ingredients for progress on sustainable development and how do we take these big, big, big, lofty things—the Sustainable Development Goals—and convert them into practical actions?

Well, for those who haven't had the chance to listen to our first episode of this series, where we talked a bit more about what 17 Rooms is, it's an approach to spurring action. It's a way of getting people together across 17 working groups, one per Sustainable Development Goal, and asking them to focus on some area—we call it a swim lane within a swim lane—within a Goal that's ripe for action and then to figure out some very specific particular next steps that can be taken on in 12 to 18 months.

This is pretty novel it feels like in a world where so many problems just seem to be intractable. And it's novel because so many of these people who come together in 17 Rooms, when they do so with an action mindset—which is the driving thesis of the whole thing is what would drive action—it seems that there's some special bits that come together to help people take some, sometimes pretty big steps forward.

KHAN: And John, what's so exciting about these podcasts to me is that, as you touched on earlier, we ran 17 Rooms thinking we knew what was happening, but in talking to all the moderators and all of the different podcasts, we learned what was actually happening and what was actually really helpful to them.

And one of the things that we learned is that there's so many talented and motivated leaders who are energized to take action on the SDGs. But they run into some constraints in helping them take some steps forward. And these can be formal institutional constraints like their institutions, strategies, or policies, or bureaucracies. But also, there's a lot of informal constraints like the culture and the norms, and frankly, some of the pageantry that's involved when you get really senior leaders trying to work together. So in many ways, I think you and I have discovered how 17 Rooms gives permission to these leaders to work and collaborate in a really different kind of way.

MCARTHUR: It's a bit of a surprise to me, Zia, that we focus so much on action, but then so much of it seems to boil down to permission. And even when people are so invigorated and so committed and driving so hard for change every day, there's something in this platform that we seem to have been building, with everyone contributing that seems to boil down to a few special permissions that help groups unlock progress. And we thought it'd be helpful for our listeners just to share four, maybe we'll call them four permissions to start. One is a permission to focus. Within these big, broad, ambitious, long term SDGs, there's so much that needs to get done, but within 17 Rooms, we encourage people to find the permission to focus in on some maybe narrow component of their goal that is ripe for action and energizes the people to get something done.

A second is permission to bring unconventional allies together. You need diverse viewpoints, you need kicking of the tires. You need people who might be focused on a similar challenge, but be approaching it from different perspectives.

Third, you need a permission to listen and to learn with institutional agendas checked at the door. We've heard over and over again how much people when they're not there to talk but first start by listening and then see where there is a shared interest, a shared perspective, something that might be convergent for action. People find that perhaps uncommonly powerful as an ingredient for success.

And then fourth is a permission to plan for next year. So many people are either caught in the urgency of the moment—and the pandemic is only amplified that for so many of us around the world—but also always asked to think about the long, long term of 10 years or some big, big question that needs a transformation. But what about next year? What about the thing that could be a big next step that's not in the immediate time horizon, but just far enough that we could think, Oh, what could we do a little bit differently? What would be an opportunity for action?

And those four permissions, to focus, to get unconventional allies together, to get people to listen, and learn with institutional agendas checked at the door, and even just to plan for next year, they seem pretty simple, each on their own, but they also seem pretty powerful when they're put together.

KHAN: And I think by helping with these permissions and making them explicit, we just speed things up. One of the hard things when people from different institutions that have different cultures and different norms come together is they spend a lot of time trying to figure out the permissions, or when they think of the organizers of a process, trying to figure out what are the permissions or what can happen there.

But by, I think, putting our finger on these things that get in the way of people moving quickly, people who have very limited time to craft something practical, we've really sped things up. And I think all of the moderators and all the participants got energized by that because they could get to proactive planning actions instead of a long time discovering, testing, and trying to establish whether these permissions exist.

MCARTHUR: I think that's so true, Zia. And we should also clarify for our listeners that we don't pretend to have figured it all out by any stretch, we're still figuring out what we're doing, but also figuring out how what we're doing fits in with everything else that so many people around the world are doing, and that, more importantly, needs to get done. So we

seem to have maybe not stumbled upon, but been able to meander forward through a collective effort that has some powerful ingredients to make a difference. But this is one piece of a broader societal toolkit, maybe, of what needs to get done for the SDGs.

KHAN: And I think what we learned about how 17 Rooms is so helpful to these co-moderators and the Rooms that they put together can probably be generalized, as you were mentioning, to more people. And I think that's something we find really exciting is the idea how could 17 Rooms and the basic principles and approaches and tools be a useful device for any community that wants to tackle these issues and make progress.

And when we think about the enormity of the challenges, and the aspirations behind the SDGs, and frankly, what we've noted as the lack of progress, we can't wait for all the formal institutions to do this. Everyone has to take it in their own hands. And that's one of the expressions we use in 17 Rooms a lot, which is not wondering what others could do or should do, but what can we do in our Room.

And we really hope that there's a lot of communities out there that are also asking this question around, What can we do? And we know they are asking that question. They just don't quite have the tools to do it. And we hope that by what we learned, which, as you mentioned, isn't everything, that some of the some of the tools, some of the approaches can be useful, and it'd be amazing if we could just unleash thousands of Rooms to drive big enough to make a difference and small enough to get done actions so that we can really live this mantra of what can we do for every community.

MCARTHUR: This action-oriented stance of what can we do is not just powerful, it seems to bring out the best in people in many ways. And so often there are so many amazing people who are looking for an opportunity to plug in or looking for a way to organize their efforts. And one of the things again to share with our listeners, we've been talking so much here about the flagship process of 17 Rooms, but there are a lot of incredible bottom-up exercises where different types of institutions have been either deploying the 17 Rooms techniques as they've been evolving, or asking to work with us to see how they could acclimate them to different environments or tailor them to different types of use cases. And this is something where we and our teams are really keen to lean in over the next couple of years.

Just to give a flavor of some of the use cases that have been emerging so far. Tec de Monterrey, major university network in Mexico, already used 17 Rooms to help its community think about partnering with local governments, industry partners, and others. Think about how do they partner in a more strategic way in their efforts for the SDGs. Georgia Tech has made a major effort thinking about how 17 Rooms can inform its strategic planning processes. University of Toronto, a major public university in Canada, has been looking through the 17 Rooms lens to see how it can organize its research efforts. So, we have a lot of universities are organizing massive conversations around how do they streamline and connect more strategically with the SDGs.

But we have other cities and even now Iceland as a country is looking to national 17 Rooms conversation. And we have some companies that have also been approaching us to say, how could they connect with 17 Rooms or use it as a device for some of their own strategic efforts.

So lots of these different use cases, and we have some work to do to figure out how best to make the 17 Rooms tools and methods helpful for others. But that's a pretty exciting place to be for us, I think, and thinking through what that could look like

KHAN: And we think a lot, John, in our 17 Rooms process how to bring together diverse perspectives, people from different sectors, different institutions so that they can productively collaborate to get to these actions.

But as you pointed out, university presidents are trying to think about how to bring their diverse communities together; mayors are thinking about this; CEOs and companies are thinking about all their diverse divisions and how to pull them together; and neighborhood leaders and community organizers are wrestling with this fundamental challenge of we know we need to bring diverse people together to solve a problem, but how do we do that, and how do we do it in a way that leads to practical concrete actions.

And a really exciting vision for 17 Rooms is eventually that this grows to be a movement where people take the challenge into their own hands of how to make practical action, practical progress against these huge global challenges that we have. And not only do we have the big institutions that we work with making progress and actions, but everyone is doing it. And I think collectively, that's how we'll realize the exciting vision that we all see in realizing the Sustainable Development Goals.

MCARTHUR: You just articulated it so nicely, Zia, because if there were to become one day in the not too distant future, a 17 Rooms Day around the world where communities could all get together to map out their next steps for the Sustainable Development Goals, that's not a substitute for anything that world leaders need to do, but it's a pretty essential complement and in many ways, maybe even more important in a lot of cases around those communities defining their next steps.

And people should not have to wait for anything that comes out of a U.N. General Assembly, as much as I believe in the power and potential of that body. But they shouldn't need to wait on that in order to make their own next steps. In fact, the Goals will never succeed if anyone feels the need to wait on that. These goals need to be approachable, they need to be practical, and people need to think about this bottom line word of cooperation and the bottom line word of action in the places where they live, and what does it look like to make a difference that people want to see in their own communities.

So for anyone out there who is listening and interested in becoming part of what we call these 17 Rooms X community of practice, please do complete a short survey at [Brookings.edu/17RoomsSurvey](https://www.brookings.edu/17RoomsSurvey) and we'd love to know what your interests are and see if there's a way that any of our new or emerging tools might be able to help you.

KHAN: And, John, this has been a really fun ride, working with you to talk to all of our co-moderators to think about the 17 Rooms process, what happened in each of those rooms. Really want to thank the interviewees. All these co-moderators are really busy. We asked them to spend a lot of time doing the 17 Rooms process, they have busy schedules. Some of them were recovering from getting their vaccine shots, but they are also game and so thoughtful, and I learned from every single discussion that we had. And I'd also like to thank the listeners who stuck with us through all these episodes. We hope you learned from them. We always learn from hearing feedback from listeners, and we're excited for you to become

part of the community. And in extra-large thanks to the incredible team that pulled this podcast together, couldn't have done it without all their help, their insight, their coaching, their support, and it was just a fantastic experience.

In terms of next steps, we're committed to continuing this journey. This experimental approach to 17 Rooms feels like it's gaining momentum. There's so much more to be done, there's so much more for us to learn, and there's still so much for us to improve and build upon. And the flagship process for 2022, we're about to kick that off with a renewed effort and impact. We're coming out of the pandemic and now is the time to really accelerate progress on all of these Sustainable Development Goals. And we want to expand the 17 Rooms methodology to communities everywhere. John, you were referencing the 17 Rooms Day, which I think is going to be such an exciting opportunity.

But however it is that we do it, helping other universities or cities or communities or regions, that the more that we can put the tools in people's hands so they can tackle their challenges with their solutions, I think that's how we're going to make a lot of progress.

MCARTHUR: Zia, you thanked all of our listeners, our interviewees, all the people who made this podcast possible. It just makes me also want to thank all the people who participated and contributed to the 17 Rooms flagship itself and all the people I wish we could also interview in this podcast, because so many people contribute in so many nuggets of insight, action, and cooperation. And it really is an extraordinary community of communities that comes together.

You mentioned that we're on our way out of the pandemic. I hope that's true. We hope we will not be doing too much of this virtually and that someday, we'll be able to get the Rooms together in person before too long and even interview people in person before too long. But in the meantime, we're just so grateful for having been able to put together this first series of the 17 Rooms podcast. And with that, this concludes the final episode of this first series.

As Zia said, like much of 17 Rooms, it's been an amazing experiment. We've learned that it's an incredible way to hear people's own personal perspectives on the issues they're confronting. And we're simply keen to learn more about how we build on these insights, how we build on these actions, and how we grow the collaborative processes of the 17 Rooms community. So stay tuned and we'll keep you posted as to what the next steps might look like.

If you haven't done so already, we encourage you to check out previous episodes from this podcast, where we had the chance to chat with extraordinary leaders and practitioners who are doing so many extraordinary things, not just within the 17 Rooms process, but in their daily lives and careers for each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. And we're so grateful to be part of this community. We're so grateful to be able to share some of these experiences with you. And with that, I'll say I'm John MacArthur.

KHAN: And I'm Zia Khan, and this has been 17 Rooms. 17 Rooms is produced by the Brookings Podcast Network. You can download and listen to it on Apple, Spotify, or wherever you like to go for your podcasts. Visit Brookings Dot Edu Slash 17 Rooms podcast to learn more.

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