

MAKE ROOM(S) FOR CHANGE

A NEW APPROACH TO HUMANITY-WIDE COOPERATION FOR THE 2020S

John W. McArthur

ONE of the many global casualties of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a halt in progress, if not worse, on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the past year and a half, virtually every country has faced new roadblocks on its path toward achieving the goals.

The reason is actually very simple: every country in the world is grappling with three foundational challenges of sustainable development. These were present prior to the onset of the novel coronavirus and have only grown in importance since. *One*, how to promote prosperity in a manner that ensures gains in income align with gains in human wellbeing? *Two*, how to create jobs and economic progress without plun-

dering the Earth's natural resources? And *three*, how to ensure all people have equal access to opportunities, in a manner that leaves no one behind? No national government has yet figured out durable solutions to any of these problems, let alone all three at once.

For country-level policymakers, the huge importance of these challenges is twinned with the huge complexity embedded in finding solutions. The underlying problems are interconnected within any geography. They seep quickly across political borders; and they evoke countless stakeholder perspectives regarding the way forward. For international policymakers, any attempt to find global solutions can feel like swimming in molasses—because

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The 17 Rooms initiative is a partnership of the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation.

it's both so hard to make progress and so hard to escape the need for ongoing conversations. The strains on international institutions are palpable.

The problems are compounded by the evolution of interests, both between and within societies. A rising global middle class, especially in Asia, has upended the influence structures that underpinned the design of so many 20th-century institutions. For the most part, these legacy structures have not been able to update themselves to reflect a new balance of interests across a new balance of power. Moreover, the same legacy structures

have done too little to help—and in some cases might well have exacerbated—the evolving balance of interests within countries. Even among the most privileged countries in the world, too many people feel ignored by self-interested international elites. The ongoing strains of a global pandemic have not fostered widespread confidence either.

Fortunately, new approaches to global cooperation can help drive new forms of global progress, but they require a new mindset around the nature of global cooperation itself. Too often, the challenges

of sustainable development—and the SDGs, in particular—focus on the formalities of shared institutions. But there is also much to be gained through the power of shared approaches.

When it comes to the SDGs, it's important to start with clarity on what they represent. In many

circles, the goals are interpreted as a broad and ambitious agenda that the United Nations has told the world to care about. The deeper truth is the opposite. The SDGs frame 17 different sets of issues that the

world told the UN not to forget about, as the repository of the world's political interests. Amid the vast spectrums of opinion embedded across soon 8 billion people, everyone has their own view on the most important problem for the world to solve, anchored in their own life experience and outlook.

Each of the 17 goals and constituent targets adopted in the formal UN agenda had sufficient numbers of people and countries backing it to ensure their issue could not be left off a global priority list for 15 years. Oceans, for example, are often overlooked as a global policy priority, even though they cover 70 percent of the planet. Goal 14 for “life below water” earned a slot on the SDG cover page because a big

enough constituency fought for it to be included. For anyone who thinks that, say, jobs, health, or inequality is the most important issue in the world, Goal 14 serves as a reminder that oceans always need high-level attention, too. In the same vein, a major set of constituencies fought hard enough to ensure

each of the other 16 goals earned a spot on the same reminder page as well.

As much as the SDGs represent a de facto shorthand for the diversity of the world's own declared

policy interests, their global scale and long-term ambition out to 2030 can still make them hard for many people to engage with. The SDGs are sometimes described rhetorically as “the world's plan.” In practice they are anything but. They are a set of ambitions, and it's for each community and country to figure out what practical steps it will take to achieve them. However, for many people around the world, the SDGs can feel inspiring at a moral level but disempowering at a practical level—too big to wrap one's arms around, too long-term to be actionable today, and too technical for the average person to make a dent. The goals are often perceived as something meant for the handful of specialists who travel to meet at UN headquarters.

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A one-word shift in emphasis offers the seeds of a new approach to cooperation—from 17 goals to 17 rooms.

This need not be the case. The SDGs can be a device for tackling practical, near-term, local concerns. They can be used to bring diverse people together around common issues of interest. And they can be leveraged to foster increased respect and connectivity among people who have different views on which issues are most important. In turn, they offer ingredients for a new path to global cooperation. It's not that formal institutions don't matter—far from it; they certainly do. But a social media-soaked world comprised of nearly 8 billion people needs new norms of individual- and community-level SDG cooperation to complement government-level action.

FROM 17 GOALS TO 17 ROOMS

Offers the seeds of a new approach to cooperation—from 17 goals to 17 rooms. In 2018, my colleague Matthew Bishop and I co-convened the first ever “17 Rooms” meeting in New York City, at The Rockefeller Foundation's headquarters, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. The core idea was to convene expert groups, across all 17 SDG issue domains, for informal conversations on opportunities for practical cooperation over the subsequent calendar year, followed by

report-outs in plenary. Each Room—or SDG-linked group—was thereby able to focus on advancing its own substantive priorities while also learning about other groups' priorities.

Over the past few years—through a partnership I now co-chair on behalf of the Brookings Center for Sustainable Development in collaboration with my colleague Zia Khan, Senior Vice President of Innovation at The Rockefeller Foundation—this international-scale experiment has

evolved quickly. As of 2021, it entails a curated annual series of 17 short-term, virtually convened working groups, all still anchored in a 12-to-18-month action horizon. The initiative offers a rare opportunity for specialists from each SDG issue domain to gather in the same Room—or Zoom—to focus on near-term horizons for bending policy curves toward longer-term success. It also offers a fruitful vehicle for cross-Room explorations. Instead of providing top-down directives on which groups “should” develop joint efforts, 17 Rooms encourages each Room to identify highly targeted issues for progress within their goal domain, and then helps to identify which opportunities for collaboration bubble up across Rooms. The upshot is a demand-driven approach to cross-SDG cooperation.

As the annual flagship process has gathered momentum, so too has another layer of offshoot efforts, which we call “17 Rooms-X.” Universities, communities, and other multi-stakeholder types of organizations have shown interest in deploying 17 Rooms techniques to organize their own local conversations for SDG action. In Canada, Mexico, Spain, the United States, and a growing range of other geographies, 17 Rooms has offered an efficient tool to promote local cooperation. The emphasis on gathering people in Rooms to focus on common possibilities for action seems to resonate beyond the realm of SDG aficionados steeped in UN policy jargon. People already working on localized issues of poverty, environmental management, or discrimination do not need the SDG vocabulary to make progress on their existing life’s work. But the SDGs do offer a common framework for the same people to come together with others around a neutral set of goals, in a way that promotes cooperation rather than competition among disparate interests struggling to make gains.

SOME KEY INGREDIENTS

In a recent stock-taking of the early years of 17 Rooms experimentation, we identified three design principles that help define the effort. First, all SDGs have a seat at the table. We respect all SDGs equally, and the same applies to the constituencies focused on

each respective goal. Second, Rooms focus on a next step, not the perfect step. 17 Rooms aims to avoid theoretical discussions on potentially abstract topics like long-term “transformation.” Instead, participants are prompted to think about the 12-to-18-month horizon to identify actions that are “big enough to matter, but small enough to get done.” Third, the initiative is anchored in conversations, not presentations. Each Room’s discussion is structured around collaboration and peer-learning; and each Room’s discussion focuses on what’s best for an issue rather than any individual organization.

With adequate curation, these design ingredients seem to offer three core value propositions. The first is a bias toward action itself. In the global flagship process, Room actions have varied from serving as an accelerant for emerging policy initiatives to sparking fresh alliances on communications, advocacy, research, or implementation efforts. In the 17 Rooms-X experiments, actions have varied from informing strategic plans to forging new local partnership strategies for the goals.

A second value proposition is the generation of insight. One layer of this is a product of interpersonal connections. Post-event surveys have shown comments akin to, “I have always thought my SDG was the most important, but now I respect how others

also think their SDG is most important too.” Another substantive layer can be found in the common themes emergent across Rooms. When considering the conversations taking shape across all 17 working groups in the 2020 global flagship process, for example, our secretariat identified four common themes of change being described across the Rooms. These themes, described as “great transitions,” each represented some incipient trend requiring a doubling down of effort in order to succeed: toward a union of economic and social justice for all; toward a blue-green replenishment of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems; toward technology platforms that promote both equitable access and trust; and toward generational transition, in a manner that promotes intergenerational partnerships and invests in young people as near-term agents of change.

A third value proposition is the most abstract but perhaps also the most profound amid recent global political dynamics: an expanded sense of community. In every 17 Rooms process, both at the global flagship and local levels, whether among international policy practitioners or university-level researchers, we have seen people report back with a sense of appreciation for the range of people who are working on adjacent problems, even if not directly collaborating. 17 Rooms seems to cultivate a spirit of “we’re all in this

together,” even when each person is highly focused on a specific piece of the overall global puzzle. The approach offers a chance to learn about the shape of other puzzle pieces and even expedite connections between some of them.

We are continuing to experiment with methodologies on an ongoing basis. This year, in the 2021 global flagship, we are testing different approaches to each Room’s working group process—varying from “campfire” strategies to forge a fresh consensus on a sticky problem, to “trial balloons” on partially formed ideas, and “direct ascents” on issues that simply need multiple actors to act.

Through our 17 Rooms-X community of practice, we will soon begin testing these same ideas with partners, while also experimenting with different permutations of the 17 Rooms approach, ranging from flash convenings with open-door participation to deep dives with curated working groups.

We plan to issue a new assessment of collective findings and insights every year.

WHERE NEXT?

The 17 Rooms initiative is starting to gain momentum during a precarious time for the SDGs. In 2020, campaigners had planned to launch a “decade of action” for the goals, but

a global pandemic put everything on hold. The crises triggered and revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted many people to question first principles of how their societies are organized, and also to ask whether the SDGs are even still relevant, in light of their ambitious targets and the ever-closer 2030 deadline. Amid a time of such widespread policy uncertainty and political fragility, the best answer seems to be to treat the SDGs as an apolitical “north star” to help guide the world out of its current mess—a focal point for great transitions toward a more just, inclusive, and sustainable planet.

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One way to navigate the turbulence toward sustainable development outcomes is to avoid excessive reliance on high-level international institutions. They will contribute what they can, but any true hope of achieving SDG outcomes hinges on a decade of *decentralized* action, within and across all countries. Multilateral cooperation on issues like peace, taxation, and global public goods (such as pandemic avoidance and protecting the atmosphere) have major consequences for all countries, but most of the innovations for SDG achievement will be bottom-up—in developing new technologies, in finding new ways to reach

and empower marginalized communities, and in brokering evolving differences of viewpoint well enough to permit each society to succeed.

In the SDG context, this requires a concerted multilateral effort to promote common action-oriented processes of all scales, within and across societies—from countries to community centers, union halls to universities. 17 Rooms can offer a vehicle for such an effort, as a widely accessible approach to tackling the broad range of societal interests embedded in the goals, and one that encourages each community to map out its own next steps in line with its own preferred scope of cooperation. Over time, a global secretariat function can amass and evaluate the collection of bottom-up actions to identify opportunities for larger scale cooperation.

This aggregation role frames a new opportunity for the United Nations. On the occasion of the UN’s recent 75th anniversary, in September 2020, the General Assembly commissioned Secretary-General António Guterres to make high-level recommendations on the future of multilateralism that will “advance our common agenda” in the spirit of “We the

peoples.” The Secretary-General will report back with his ideas this upcoming September.

In considering the future of multilateral cooperation, it’s a worthwhile exercise to start even with the adjective and noun in the United Nations’ own name. For the adjective, the world’s disparate interests hardly seem “united” right now. A peak global organization needs to be defined by productive action, and hence a verb tense like “uniting” would be more pertinent. On the noun, “nations” and sovereign states might form the bedrock of international law, but many of the greatest sustainable development challenges will boil down to the extent to which people in communities around the world can contribute their own distinct actions to humanity’s common agenda.

If starting with a blank slate, a more apt name for an action-oriented geopolitical body might be “Uniting Communities” or even “Uniting People.” Recognizing that the simplest way to unite people is to bring them together in the same room (or locally equivalent meeting space), such an organization could tackle a mandate of

promoting decentralized, room-level conversation and cooperation for sustainable development in every community around the world. Whether or not the UN could change its formal name or Charter any time soon, the Secretary-General could certainly

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make this a hallmark of his forthcoming second term: *Uniting all people toward sustainable development for all.*

This spirit of uniting people around the world to think practically about cooperative next steps could help renovate the traditional approach to UN gatherings. A new vision could crystallize through a single annual event. For instance, “Giving Tuesday” was created in 2012, as an annual day that encourages people to donate and do good. Nine years later, it now extends across 70 countries. In a similar spirit, a common day could be set aside for the world’s local communities to gather in their own rooms to map out their own cooperative actions for the SDGs over the following calendar year. This could be a day of the week—17 Rooms Sunday, anyone?—or equally a date in the calendar—say September 17th—in the run-up to the annual gathering of heads of state and government at UN

headquarters for the General Debate held in late September every year. Giving Tuesday has shown how fast a collaborative global undertaking can grow in nine years. There's no reason why a 17 Rooms day, with all its starting advantages, couldn't be far bigger nine years from now, in 2030.

A humanity-wide day for local groups to deliberate and cooperate across all the SDGs would leverage the goals in their purest form—as a common language to drive cross-constituency collaboration, anchored in premises of action and mutual respect. Over the coming decade, new forms of technology and social media

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will only expand communities' abilities to self-organize toward common goals. Whether implemented globally on a common day or not, the

beauty of a 17 Rooms approach would be its ability to translate the SDGs into a practical tool to help everyday people advance economic, social, and environmental priorities through cooperation on their own terms, measured against neutral benchmarks of long-term progress. As a new form of global cooperation, the message to

political elites would be clear: Here's what we're doing together to drive sustainable development forward—how about you? ●

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