



17

ROOMS

A new approach to
spurring action for
the Sustainable
Development Goals

February 2021

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Sustainable
Development
at BROOKINGS



The
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FOREWORD

This report describes a new approach to stimulating cooperative action toward the Sustainable Development Goals. As an experimental method for SDG convening and problem-solving, 17 Rooms aims to surface practical next steps within each goal while also stimulating productive connections across all goals. In its early incarnations, 17 Rooms has proven useful at multiple scales of action, ranging from local communities to the global level. The approach can be just as effective for experts immersed in UN frameworks as for community practitioners who operate free of international policy jargon. This report takes stock of the 17 Rooms initiative as of early 2021 and captures emerging insights for a broader community of readers who might be interested in collaborating moving forward.

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Photographs of the 2018 and 2019 flagship summit were provided by The Rockefeller Foundation.

17 ROOMS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A core motivation for establishing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 was to break from business-as-usual. As the past year's COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing global crises have only underscored, a more just, sustainable, and inclusive world requires new forms of action, technology, and partnership at all levels – spanning business, science, government, and civil society.

The need for innovation extends to the process of problem-solving itself. Every country and local community needs its own efforts to work through multi-stakeholder debates and priorities. Specialist constituencies require opportunities to gather and hash out technical issues in depth. Spaces for policymaking and deliberation need not be rigidly formal. Many problems simply need creative environments for people to float ideas and explore cooperation on next steps, away from the pressures of microphones and public spotlights.

In September 2018, the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation convened the first experimental 17 Rooms session, on the eve of the UN General Assembly, to spur progress within each SDG and bridge insights across goals. After only a few years of quick evolution, the initiative has tapped into widespread interest in new approaches to advancing the SDGs, through both a global flagship process and a widely-accessible offshoot dubbed “17 Rooms-X” (or “17 Rooms-U” for universities).

WHAT IS 17 ROOMS?

17 Rooms offers an efficient way of convening natural allies, ideally promoting enough familiarity to enable collaboration and enough diversity to spark new ideas and pathways to action. Each Room is a working group focused on one of the 17 respective SDGs. Early years of experimentation have surfaced some core design principles:



All SDGs get a seat at the table: Each 17 Rooms process respects unique priorities within goals while recognizing interdependencies between goals.



Take a next step, not the perfect step: Rooms focus on actionable ideas within an SDG that are “big enough to matter and small enough to get done” over a 12-18 month horizon.



Engage in conversations, not presentations: Convenings celebrate informal discussions among peers, with institutional agendas at the door, focusing on what could be best for an issue, not for an organization.

CREATING VALUE

When combined, these design principles empower participants to:

- **Advance concrete actions:** All Rooms are tasked to consider what is needed and what participants can do over the following 12-18 months. Outputs might range from influencing a research initiative to creating an analytical tool, a communications campaign, a policy shift, a strategic plan, or even a new entity.
- **Form novel insights:** When participants working on common problems share their perspectives from different backgrounds, organizations, and sectors, unique forms of group learning occur, both within and across Rooms.
- **Foster pragmatic communities:** A collaborative quest for action grounded in recognition of diverse outlooks appears to generate a shared sense of energy and opportunity.

17 ROOMS FLAGSHIP

The highly curated annual 17 Rooms flagship focuses on global scale SDG challenges. It has formed a “tip of the arrow” advancing the overall thinking of what the methods can be and providing lessons to inform community-level syndication efforts. As of 2020, the flagship includes five distinct phases: (1) organizers identify and work with moderators to select a substantive focus within an SDG and suitable participant composition for each Room; (2) each Room convenes to share perspectives and develop a draft document that outlines actionable ideas to advance progress within their SDG; (3) Rooms learn about other Rooms’ priorities, share feedback, and explore common areas of interest; (4) each Room presents its key insights in a lightning round series of presentations; (5) Rooms chart their own course to impact, with support from the secretariat team, which also identifies crosscutting insights and discussions that generated the greatest enthusiasm and opportunities for follow-up. An internal learning process concurrently enables the initiative to keep updating itself every year.

17 ROOMS-X

17 Rooms has also proven valuable at local levels, as a tool for thinking practically about the SDGs at any scale of community or geography. Remarkably, a range of 17

Rooms offshoot experiments have already taken place, with minimal guidance from the Brookings Institution or The Rockefeller Foundation. Universities have so far been the first movers in piloting their own “17 Rooms-U” efforts, while a variety of municipalities, companies, and other organizations have also expressed interest in convening their own processes in the near future.

These experiments have shown a variety of ways in which a 17 Rooms-X process can:

- unlock information regarding the diverse SDG interests and activities that might already be embedded across a community,
- leverage the SDGs as a tool for common conversations across groups that might otherwise struggle to connect across professional vocabularies and organizational reference points, and
- offer a method for spurring cooperation among people who might not otherwise have the chance to do so.

17 Rooms-X offers a device for stimulating bottom-up awareness and cooperation across the many perspectives and interests that are all pertinent to sustainable development, while also creating a bridge between local grassroots activities and traditional institutional SDG stakeholders.

WHAT NEXT?

In 2021, the 17 Rooms initiative will keep updating its methods and codifying insights through a new cycle of experimentation. The annual global flagship – “version 4.0” – will continue as a virtual international process until COVID-19 is better under control and in-person convenings are again safe. Meanwhile, the secretariat will provide more systematic support to offshoot efforts, including the launch of a beta toolkit and community of practice, so that partners can more easily share learnings and insights across their own “17 Rooms-X” processes.

If you are interested in joining the 17 Rooms community of discovery, design, and implementation – whether by hosting a 17 Rooms-X process or something else – please email the 17 Rooms secretariat at 17Rooms@brookings.edu.



Rebecca Winthrop, Senior Fellow and Co-director, Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution and Moderator of Room 4 on quality education, brainstorms with Room members during the 2018 inaugural gathering at The Rockefeller Foundation headquarters in New York City.



Participants in the 2020 flagship virtual summit share a laugh when Otis Rolley (right column, second from top), Senior Vice President, U.S. Equity and Economic Opportunity Initiative at The Rockefeller Foundation and Co-Moderator of Room 8 on decent work and economic growth, blasts the song “9 to 5” during his Room’s report out.

INTRODUCTION

The [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) embody the world's foremost economic, social, and environmental challenges. Ranging from the end of extreme poverty to the reversal of climate change and the elimination of social exclusion, 17 distinct but interconnected goals touch on most aspects of life on earth. Ultimately, the SDGs help define what it means to be a successful society moving forward, anchored in a 2030 time horizon.

A core motivation for establishing the SDGs in 2015 was to break from business-as-usual. No country's economic, social, and environmental trajectory is good enough. The past year's COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing global crises have only underscored the need for change. The world needs to innovate its way to a new equilibrium. A more just, sustainable, and inclusive world requires new forms of action, technology, and partnership at all levels – spanning business, science, government, and civil society.

The need for innovation also applies to the process of problem-solving itself. How the world orchestrates efforts to support the SDGs receives much less attention than the substantive priorities embedded within the goals. This needs to change. Although countless existing efforts contribute meaningfully to each goal across all scales of geography, existing institutions and systems do not yet spur enough action, collaboration, or creativity to bridge the full range of societal stakeholders who must directly engage in the practicalities of the SDGs. New approaches to coordinating interested parties could have an outsized effect in driving new types of action.

The UN is the body with foremost official responsibility for shepherding SDG advances: publishing official assessments of progress, convening member states to share national experiences, and promoting partnerships among diverse stakeholders around the world to help achieve the goals. These apex global policy efforts are crucial. But they form only one piece of a broader puzzle of action required for SDG success. Most of the practical actions for the SDGs will be developed and implemented far outside the walls of UN conference rooms.

SDG success requires groups of people getting together, around the world, to identify and implement new forms of cooperation. Every country and local community needs its own forums to work through multi-stakeholder debates and priorities. Specialist

constituencies require opportunities to gather and to hash out technical debates in depth. Spaces for policymaking and debate need not always be rigidly formal. Many hard problems simply need creative environments for people to float ideas and explore possible collaborations on next steps, away from the pressures of microphones and public spotlights.

ENTER 17 ROOMS

The 17 Rooms initiative responds to the need for more creative, collaborative, and action-oriented processes spanning all the SDGs. The Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation convened the first experimental session in September 2018, on the eve of the UN General Assembly, to spur progress within each goal and bridge insights across goals (see Box 1. Quick History). An unencumbered and urgent hackathon-type spirit of action

prevailed within and across 17 breakout groups, or “Rooms,” striking a chord of enthusiasm among participants. In 2019, the second annual flagship gathering in New York included more deliberate Room-by-Room preparations and a semi-structured exchange of insights between Rooms. Universities started to experiment with localized offshoot processes too.

In 2020, COVID-19 drove everything virtual – 17 Zooms! – in both the flagship and offshoot processes. The flagship introduced a short sequence of working group sessions in the months leading up to a September virtual summit, which focused on curated exchanges between the Rooms. UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed joined as “keynote listener” for the Room read-outs, connecting the discussions with the highest levels of international SDG policymaking. Each Room then published its own [short document](#) of insights and actionable ideas for the year ahead, and the secretariat published a [synthesis report](#) inspired by the work of the Rooms.

Achieving the SDGs requires new solutions and new ways of working. 17 Rooms is an innovative way to identify concrete ideas and action plans, whether it be a university-wide strategy, a local community’s SDG plan, a whole of government effort or a new community of practice across multiple sectors.

Margaret Biggs

Chairperson, International Development Research Centre, & Co-founder, 17 Rooms initiative

After only a few years of quick evolution, the 17 Rooms initiative has tapped into widespread interest in new approaches to advancing the SDGs. At the international level, many people appear hungry for opportunities to contribute to efforts that cut through to practical action on the SDGs, while also being frank about the multidimensional nature of the goals and the difficulty of the task at hand. At the local level – within cities, university campuses, companies, and professional associations – many people seek ways to harness local interest in the SDGs, or to connect what might feel like far-away global SDG conversations with issues in their own communities. Many constituencies are simply eager to find ways to “plug in” to the SDGs as a framework for stimulating cooperative action.



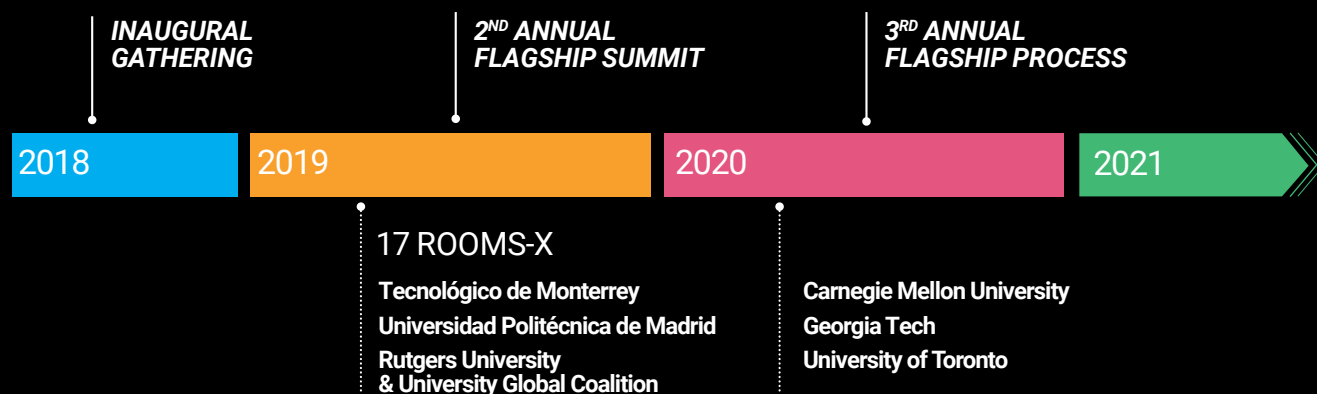
John R. Allen, President of the Brookings Institution (left) and Rajiv Shah, President of The Rockefeller Foundation (right) kick-off the closing plenary of the 2019 flagship summit in New York City.

WHAT IS 17 ROOMS?

17 Rooms aims to spur actions, insights, and communities that advance practical steps forward for the SDGs. Since the initial experimental meeting in September 2018, the initiative has branched into two distinct formats (see Figure 1). The first is the flagship process, which convenes leading experts and practitioners to tackle global-scale SDG priorities. The second applies the flagship’s basic approaches to localized contexts, and has been dubbed “17 Rooms-X” (or “17 Rooms-U” for universities). Both formats offer an efficient way of convening potential natural allies, ideally promoting enough familiarity to enable collaboration and enough diversity to spark new ideas and concrete pathways to action.

As an evolving approach, 17 Rooms does not lend itself to a simple or static description. In fact, 17 Rooms deliberately avoids having too many hard and fast rules in order to preserve enough space to keep exploring and innovating. Nonetheless, early years of experimentation have surfaced certain core design principles that help drive the initiative forward at the flagship and local syndication levels.

FIGURE 1. TIMELINE: THE EVOLUTION OF 17 ROOMS



CORE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

1. ALL SDGS GET A SEAT AT THE TABLE



The first key principle of 17 Rooms is to promote action within each SDG and stimulate connections across all SDGs. The UN's formal designation of 17 distinct goals reflects the breadth of substantive issues and technical domains that are essential to the overarching challenges of sustainable development. 17 Rooms strives to honor the perspectives of each SDG-specific specialist community. But the 17 goals are also often considered together, as a holistic framework requiring integrated approaches. One of the foremost practical challenges of the SDGs is to provide an actionable process that fosters necessary expertise within each goal while recognizing and mapping the complex substantive interdependencies between goals. 17 Rooms aims to be a vehicle for fostering cross-disciplinary connectivity, without being overly complicated. The flagship process promotes collaboration by spotting overlapping ideas that bubble up among Rooms – or working groups – rather than trying to impose preconceived conceptual links across Rooms.

2. TAKE A NEXT STEP, NOT THE PERFECT STEP



In any 17 Rooms process, each Room is encouraged to think about actionable ideas that are “big enough to matter and small enough to get done.” The range of embedded issues within any single SDG, let alone the full agenda, remains too broad and complex to be properly addressed in any small number of conversations. For this reason, 17 Rooms encourages each working group to identify components of their respective goal that are ripe for action, rather than worry about everything that needs to be done across every dimension of a goal. A ripe slice for action might take the form of a specific SDG target or a sub-set of targets most pertinent to a specific geography.¹

1. The best approach to winnowing down will depend on the composition of a particular Room. It might often be strategic to curate Room participants who are naturally suited to align around a specific challenge within an SDG.

Time horizons are also central to the 17 Rooms approach. Rooms are asked to identify actions over a 12-18 month period that can contribute to longer-term change. This is framed as a complement to longer-range key scientific and policy efforts for the SDGs, since many groups find it difficult to deliberate efficiently on the full course of actions required over a decade-long horizon. At the other end of the spectrum, it can also be difficult to think creatively about taking on extra near-term actions or collaborations amid the urgency of day-to-day work pressures and constraints.

In this context, 17 Rooms encourages thinking about cooperation beyond the most immediate constraints, but within a time scale that remains viable for collaboration and commitment – for instance, in an upcoming annual budget cycle. Within each Room discussion, the priority is to identify opportunities for next steps, however imperfect, rather than arguing over an ideal long-term sequence of steps. By replacing a pressure for perfection with a preference for progress, different sources of action can garner momentum.

The emphasis on action encourages Room participants to think about what they themselves can contribute, as opposed to opining on what others should do. Even if a group believes some major external actor needs to take a specific action, the question becomes: what can we do to advance that action?

3. ENGAGE IN CONVERSATIONS, NOT PRESENTATIONS



As much as 17 Rooms is guided by an imperative for action, it is also anchored in the need for respectful and spirited dialogue. While many formal conferences and policy processes run the risk of orchestrating scripted presentations to passive audiences that do not lead to discernible change, 17 Rooms celebrates informal conversations among knowledgeable peers that might help trigger faster progress. Organizers ask participants to check their institutional agendas at the door, and to focus on what would be best for an issue, not for an organization. In an egalitarian spirit, Room conversations are led by “moderators,” rather than hierarchical “chairs.” Using the Chatham House Rule permits people to take ideas from the conversation forward without attributing them to any source. This in turn provides enhanced permission for participants to take creative risks in exploring new ideas.

BOX 1. QUICK HISTORY OF 17 ROOMS

Like many entrepreneurial undertakings, 17 Rooms has evolved since its original conception. In 2015, Margaret Biggs (then of Queen's University) and John McArthur (then of the Brookings Institution and UN Foundation) co-chaired a Canadian [study group](#) that recommended the creation of a new Global Sustainable Development Forum (GSDF) preceding the UN's annual high-level political forums in New York. This would be "multi-sectoral, multi-stakeholder and multi-generational in its nature. It could regularly convene, on 'neutral ground,' global political, scientific, practitioner and civil society leaders to discuss frontier global issues requiring innovative ideas and collaborative solutions."

In mid-2016, responding to some informal expressions of interest in the GSDF concept, Biggs and McArthur further fleshed out the ideas. They wrote a memo asserting that, "A new form of global convening is required, outside traditional intergovernmental forums. It needs to help the Global Goals' 17 distinct professional communities [...] accelerate their implementation efforts, both independently and collectively." Biggs and McArthur suggested that a GSDF could convene 17 respective action groups, one for each of the SDGs. However, despite initial interest, the proposal was not taken up, so the idea lay dormant for two years.

Then, in June 2018, McArthur mentioned the idea to Matthew Bishop, then a Managing Director of The Rockefeller Foundation, during a conference on Innovative Frontiers of Development at the Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy. Bishop dubbed the idea "17 Rooms!" with a chuckle, and then asked, referring to The Rockefeller Foundation, "We could do that, couldn't we?"

Bishop and McArthur agreed to convene an experimental "17 Rooms" session in New York City, on the eve of the UN General Assembly's annual September high-level segment. Drawing from their professional networks,



Matthew Bishop (left) and John McArthur (right), co-founders of the 17 Rooms initiative, address participants during the closing plenary of the 2019 flagship summit at the New York Public Library.

they quickly identified Moderators for each of the 17 Rooms and invited more than 100 people to an informal afternoon session. Each SDG-focused break-out group focused on two questions: (1) what actions could be taken by the end of 2019 to advance the respective goal, and (2) what would a successful UN outcome look like at the first UN SDG check-point summit the following year, in September 2019? Gathering on a Sunday afternoon at The Rockefeller Foundation offices in Midtown Manhattan, and with the critical support of Rockefeller Foundation staff who mobilized rapidly to make the logistics work, each group met for a couple of hours before returning to offer 2-minute read outs in plenary.

The free-wheeling spirit of the first meeting touched a positive nerve for many of the participants. It was creative; it focused on conversations rather than speeches; and it was driven by a spirit of urgency and action. Moreover, it offered an opportunity for specialists from different domains of expertise to tackle common SDG-focused questions that were pertinent to their own domain. In the

BOX 1. QUICK HISTORY OF 17 ROOMS (CONTINUED)

process, they were able to have their own mini-meeting while interacting with, and hearing from, participants in parallel mini-meetings.

The original 17 Rooms experiment was successful enough for people to request another version the next year. In April 2019, a subset of the 2018 meeting Moderators gathered and agreed the next annual iteration should produce short Room documents to inform the September summit conversations. The 2019 September meeting program also introduced the notion of direct exchange between all Rooms, with each Room receiving two rounds of feedback from members of other Rooms. Following that meeting, a public [summary report](#) described all the Rooms' recommended action priorities for 2020, organized under seven categories: new entities, new initiatives, key events, policy shifts, new standards, advocacy priorities, and research priorities.

In parallel with the evolution of the annual flagship process, 2019 saw different communities experiment with local adaptations of the 17 Rooms approach. Following McArthur's description of 17 Rooms at a University Global Compact (UGC) leadership retreat in May 2019, also supported by The Rockefeller Foundation,

Tec de Monterrey and Universidad Politécnica de Madrid convened their own campus-level "17 Rooms-U" experiments in July of the same year. Several universities have followed suit with their own local experiments (see Box 3), while a variety of cities, companies, and non-governmental organizations have also started to explore their own related efforts.

By the end of 2019, the 17 Rooms approach was clearly offering opportunities to stimulate new forms of SDG action at multiple scales, ranging from global policy debates to community-level priorities. As a result, Brookings and The Rockefeller Foundation committed in 2020 to a longer-term partnership in co-hosting the annual 17 Rooms flagship process and experimenting with localized offshoot efforts. As of early 2021, a small project secretariat is now housed within the new Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings, directed by John McArthur, working in close day-to-day collaboration with the innovation team at The Rockefeller Foundation, led by Zia Khan.



17 Rooms participants mingle following the closing plenary of the 2019 flagship summit at the New York Public Library.

CREATING VALUE

How do these design principles come together to create value? 17 Rooms seeks to make the most of participants' scarce time to advance concrete actions, form novel insights, and foster pragmatic communities.

ACTION

Within a 17 Rooms process, all Rooms are tasked with answering the same action-oriented question. In the flagship process, each year's question is calibrated to the present context. For example, in 2020, the core assignment was the following:

In light of recent crises linked to COVID-19, systemic racism, and other urgent challenges, what are 1 to 3 actionable priorities over the coming 12-18 months (i.e., by the end of 2021) that address near-term needs while also making a decisive contribution to protecting or advancing your Goal's 2030 results? What actions can members of your Room take to advance these priorities?

Simply summarized, the first question is asking "what is needed" by the end of 2021? The second question is asking "what can we do?"

Importantly, there is no single correct "type" of action. A Room might decide to bolster a nascent idea, lend weight to an existing initiative or, alternatively, launch something new. The diversity of actionable priorities identified through the [2019](#) and [2020](#) flagship processes show the range of possible actions that might emerge when asking 17 different disciplinary groups to answer a common SDG-focused question. Each Room's conversation might lead to different forms of outputs, such as influencing or creating a:

- research initiative
- strategic plan
- major event
- new analytical tool or technique
- public communications campaign
- new professional norm or standard
- policy change
- new entity or organization

At a time when too many meetings consist of nothing but hot air, it was such a privilege to help start something that brought together purposeful people for real conversations that have led to practical action on the most important challenges facing our generation.

Matthew Bishop

Co-founder, Social Progress Index, Co-founder, 17 Rooms & Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

Ideally, each actionable idea should be accompanied by a suitably specific plan: namely, how will the idea be executed, and by whom? And who will benefit as a result? Rooms are encouraged to consider these questions through the arc of their process. 17 Rooms encourages participants to take ownership for implementing their ideas. Even though participants are asked to check their institutional agendas at the door when joining a Room, they are still encouraged to bring their institutional resources to bear, wherever appropriate, in carrying ideas and actions forward.

17 Rooms is a unique platform to advance meaningful progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. It catalyzes relationships that create “bite size” approaches to global aspirations. I’ve been inspired by the insights and actionable ideas coming out of our discussions on gender equality.

Michelle Nunn

President and CEO, CARE USA



Michelle Nunn, President and CEO, CARE USA (left) and Blessing Omakwu, Founder, The She Tank (right) present Room 5’s action priorities during the plenary “report out” session at the 2019 flagship summit.

INSIGHT

Discovering novel insights and opportunities for progress can be the most exhilarating part of any group problem-solving process. But a common pitfall of many traditional convenings is that the initial buzz of these “aha” moments quickly dissipates when people disperse. By emphasizing “next steps” as a fundamental theme, 17 Rooms helps drive energy toward pragmatic action.

The design of 17 Rooms fosters unique forms of group learning. Many participants report important learning occurring within Rooms, when people working on common problems share their perspectives from different backgrounds, organizations, and sectors.

Participants also learn across Rooms. Within 17 Rooms, cross-Room exploration hinges on learning other Rooms’ outlooks and action plans as a starting point, and then exploring where insights and viewpoints might align. This process often prompts specialists from one Room to unearth some of their own assumptions about other Rooms, or to recognize a need to learn more about other specialties’ assumptions. It also allows participants to make new discoveries, elicit feedback on their own efforts, and identify connections between nascent undertakings.

For example, at the outset of any 17 Rooms process, it is not uncommon for a member of one Room to enter a session convinced that “their” SDG is the one that underpins success on all the other SDGs. But then, by listening to people from different Rooms who similarly believe their goal is the most important, participants begin to internalize – and hopefully foster respect for – the broad range of perspectives that need to be taken into account when considering actions across all the SDGs.

17 Rooms has now become an indispensable piece of the SDG infrastructure - if it didn't exist, we would have to create it. It's telling that 17 Rooms is being picked up and adapted by other communities to drive change in their own institutions.

Elizabeth Cousens

CEO, UN Foundation

COMMUNITY

One of the most notable aspects of early 17 Rooms experiences is how many participants identify the sense of community as a highlight unto itself. A collaborative quest for action grounded in practical constraints of the year ahead appears to foster a shared sense of energetic pragmatism. In the 2020 flagship's post-summit survey, more than 80 percent of respondents listed engagement, interaction, networking, and conversation with other participants as the most valuable part of the process. For universities that have experimented with the 17 Rooms methodology, simply discovering what different SDG-related activities already exist across campus seems to create a community-building benefit that fosters opportunities for improved inter-disciplinary collaboration.

In surveys and interviews, 17 Rooms flagship participants have also emphasized its inclusiveness as fundamental. People appreciate things like "hearing how our work fits into this larger landscape."² One recent participant underscored the value of "meeting people and understanding their perspective, and being able to contribute mine," while another described the conversations as a "(creative) clash of ideas with great minds." Over time, the 17 Rooms secretariat hopes the communities forged through the growing range of 17 Rooms processes can offer consultation and feedback for programming innovations year on year.

17 Rooms encourages participation in solving the challenges of the 17 SDGs: An interwoven complex of obligatory elements with a modern day Eden at the end of the labyrinth.

Tom Lovejoy

University Professor, George Mason University & Senior Fellow, UN Foundation

2. Drawn from a response to the 17 Rooms 2020 flagship summit post-event survey

17 ROOMS FORMATS

Until now, the highly curated 17 Rooms flagship has formed a “tip of the arrow” advancing the overall thinking of what the methods can be and providing lessons to inform community-level syndication efforts. But over time, local-level 17 Rooms-X and 17 Rooms-U syndication experiments will hopefully stimulate process innovations that can feed back into the global flagship.

FLAGSHIP

The annual flagship process has evolved to comprise, as of 2020, five distinct phases of execution (see Figure 2).

1. Curate Room composition

Each year, the flagship process begins by identifying Room Moderators. In initial years, these were recruited through organizers’ extended networks based on availability in New York during the UN General Assembly. As more advanced planning took hold, Moderators were also invited in line with the evolving nature of the global SDG agenda and opportunities or priorities that the 17 Rooms co-chairs spot for progress – for example, in 2020, for Room 3 (health and wellbeing) to focus on issues related to pandemics. Starting in 2020, each Room had at least two co-Moderators to anchor each group in a pairing of complementary perspectives and competencies.

The secretariat then works with Moderators to identify a substantive focus for their Room and identify a cross-section of 10-15 participants (and sometimes more) who align with the thematic thrust. In 2020, Moderators considered a handful of criteria to help identify an appropriate mix of Room participants, including range

FIGURE 2. 17 ROOMS FLAGSHIP PROCESS AS OF 2020



of expertise, diversity, gender balance, stakeholder representation, “up and comer” perspectives, and, crucially, a sense of team-spiritedness.

2. Craft Room proposals

The next step is for each Room to convene its own initial conversations. In 2020, this was done virtually, in June and July. In cases where Moderators bring a starting proposition to the Room, this helps to anchor the discussion in concrete ideas that others can critique or improve through conversation. In Rooms that begin without an initial proposition, groups typically followed a three-step arc over one or more conversations: first, sharing perspectives; second, brainstorming ideas for collaborative action; and third, sharpening ideas into practical steps forward.

Importantly, Room participants are not all asked to sign on to a single action. Instead, participants are encouraged to explore opportunities for cooperation on areas of shared interest. Insights and actions can be developed at any scale the Room deems fit, whether at global, national, regional, community, or even institutional levels. In some cases, this might lead to multiple overlapping subgroups agreeing to collaborate on a mixture of different activities. In other cases, it might lead to many of a Room’s participants agreeing to collaborate on a single activity. The key is to avoid any feeling of obligatory sign-on or undue conformity. Somewhat paradoxically, within an overarching 17 Rooms process that is explicitly biased toward action, the lack of formal pressure to commit aims to create a generative space in which participants can freely propose ideas that might excite others to collaborate.

As of the most recent flagship process, the first key substantive juncture arrives when each Room submits its draft response to the common cross-Room assignment. In 2020,

Though it covers 70 percent of the planet and is vital to our existence, our ocean is often absent from major agendas. 17 Rooms has enabled us to work across all the other SDGs and raise our ocean’s relevance.

Kristin Rechberger

CEO, Dynamic Planet

Enric Sala

*Explorer-in-Residence, National Geographic
& Executive Director, Pristine Seas*

these took the form of a short 1-2 page document, outlining the group's initial insights and actionable ideas.

3. Exchange proposals and insights across Rooms

The draft Room documents provide a practical anchor for cross-Room exchange, in a number of ways. They act as an efficient vehicle for participants to learn about other Rooms' priorities, to share feedback, and to explore collaboration on areas of common interest. The documents also permit a secretariat function to digest all the conversations across the Rooms and synthesize any emergent cross-cutting themes that might lend themselves to cross-Room action.

Importantly, each Room completes its draft document before reviewing the insights, priorities, and proposals of other Rooms. This is despite the fact that Room participants are often keen to interact as soon as possible with participants from other Rooms, sometimes prior even to meeting within their own Room. Everyone wants to know what other Rooms are saying, partly to learn more about priorities and ideas coming from other SDGs, and also to strategize what their own Room might best say. But if each Room is waiting for another Room to say something first, then no one says anything!



Mauricio Rodas, former Mayor of Quito, Ecuador; Yvonne Aki-Sawyerr, Mayor of Freetown, Sierra Leone; and Penny Abeywardena, Commissioner for International Affairs in New York City exchange ideas as members of Room 11 on sustainable cities and communities in 2019.

This is why Rooms need to complete their own (home)work before engaging with the action proposals, insights, and networks of other Rooms.

In the 2020 flagship process, the September virtual summit was the culminating moment of exchange between Rooms. Although COVID-19 removed the opportunity for an in-person event, a condensed online format still allowed for carefully curated interchanges. A “marketplace” allowed for participants to visit another Room of interest, with Moderators staying in their “home” Rooms to present ideas and solicit feedback, while the other participants visited other Rooms to hear ideas and offer feedback. Participants also joined in one of 10 cross-cutting “synergy” discussions that were framed based on the initial work of each Room. The summit further scheduled opportunities for more informal and spontaneous small group interactions to foster human connections across the 17 Rooms community.

4. Distill insights and actions

After the cross-Room exchanges, each Room presents its key insights to other Rooms in a lightning round series of presentations. In the 2020 virtual summit the UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed also served as keynote listener to these presentations, providing rapid feedback to each Room and suggesting potential ideas to consider moving forward.

At Carnegie Mellon University, we found 17 Rooms (conducted by Zoom) indispensable and eye-opening as we gathered information on how our education, research, and practice aligns with the SDGs for our Voluntary University Review. In several Rooms, participants learned about like-minded colleagues, research, or classes at the university they had not previously known about that aligned or overlapped with their own interests.

Sarah Mendelson

Distinguished Service Professor of Public Policy & Head of Heinz College in Washington DC, Carnegie Mellon University

Following the cross-Room exchanges, each Room is encouraged to integrate any relevant ideas and insights into its own plans before submitting a final version of its Room document. Notably, in the recent flagships, every [Room](#) has taken a different approach to answering the common overarching question. The secretariat also then identified which cross-cutting insights and discussions had generated the greatest enthusiasm and opportunities for follow-up. These informed the secretariat's [Great Transitions](#) report, which was published alongside the Room documents. It identified four major trends requiring intensified efforts in order to advance the SDGs worldwide (see Box 2. Great Transitions & priorities for 2021).

The 17 Rooms methodology works quickly and effectively to facilitate immediate action within SDGs and collaboration between diverse stakeholders across all SDGs. By being part of this initiative, we've learnt from other Universities around the world, and hope others learnt from us.

Guillermo Cisneros

Rector, Universidad Politécnica Madrid



Room 17 on partnerships deliberates during the inaugural 17 Rooms convening in September 2018.

BOX 2. GREAT TRANSITIONS TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

According to the 17 Rooms global flagship participants in 2020, COVID-19 and related crises have only heightened the importance of the SDGs, as a “North Star” to help steer longer-horizon efforts. But the shifting global context requires a new outlook. What should this prioritize? Inspired by the work of the 17 different Rooms, an insights report boiled it down to four “great transitions”: for justice, for the environment, for technology, and for the next generation. These are summarized below, accompanied by selected action priorities emerging from the 2020 flagship Rooms.

1. Towards justice for all: From tackling economic and social inequalities independently to recoupling economic and social progress for everyone

- Launching a #JustRecovery campaign
- Promoting widespread implementation of fiscal distribution metrics
- Creating a new Liquidity and Sustainability Facility
- Expanding municipal access to global finance
- Crowdsourcing breakthrough messaging for gender equality
- Convening a “last mile alliance” against poverty
- Advancing a campaign to finance WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) as “PPE”
- Upping the “S” [social] dimensions of corporate ESG metrics

2. Towards blue-green replenishment: From valuing natural capital at the margin to actively stewarding nature at scale

- Embedding 30 percent protection targets in the 2021 UN Convention on Biological Diversity summit

- Launching a G-20 green infrastructure and jobs initiative
- Creating a circular city accelerator
- Advancing case studies for True Cost Accounting

3. Towards equitable technology infrastructure: From celebrating novel applications to building inclusive systems for innovation

- Connecting epidemic sentinel networks
- Creating pooled procurement for renewable energy technologies in frontier markets
- Piloting equitable digital public infrastructure

4. Towards generational transition: From preparing young people for the future to partnering with next generation leadership

- Convening regional, sub-regional, and national forums on rebuilding education systems
- Promoting inter-university collaboration on learning tools for community stakeholders
- Launching an intergenerational leadership incubator

The Great Transitions report and 17 individual Room documents from 2020 are all [available for download online.](#)



5. Follow-up and learning

In the post-summit process, it is ultimately up to each Room to chart its own course to impact. But the secretariat also surveys participants and interviews Moderators to identify which specific ideas might be ripest for forward movement over the subsequent year. The secretariat aims to be proactive in helping Rooms channel energies and track progress.

Concurrently, the 17 Rooms initiative aims to keep updating itself every year, through internal learning and innovation. As part of this, the project secretariat – which was consolidated only in late 2020 – also uses surveys and interviews to inform the emerging codification of insights and approaches across Rooms. Moving forward, the broader 17 Rooms community members will be canvassed on a more systematic basis, both to capture evolving outlooks and to inform future plans as the global SDG context continues to evolve.



Zia Khan, Senior Vice President, Innovation at The Rockefeller Foundation and co-chair of the 17 Rooms initiative, uses a bingo machine to randomly call on Rooms during the plenary “report out” session at the 2020 virtual flagship summit.

OFFSHOOTS: 17 ROOMS-X

As a widely-accessible methodology, 17 Rooms has already proven valuable at the local level. For many people, the SDGs can feel too big or abstract to be tractable, so the 17 Rooms-X process offers a tool for thinking practically about the goals at any scale of community or geography. While the flagship process generally focuses on global challenges, leaders in cities, universities, companies, non-governmental organizations, and professional associations are increasingly seeking ways to tap their own community members' interest in leveraging the SDG framework and contributing to the goals themselves. 17 Rooms-X offers a device for stimulating bottom-up awareness and cooperation across the many perspectives and interests that are all pertinent to sustainable development.

Remarkably, a range of 17 Rooms offshoot experiments has already taken place, with minimal guidance from the Brookings Institution or The Rockefeller Foundation. While a variety of municipalities, companies, and other organizations have expressed interest in convening their own processes in the near future, universities have so far been the first movers in piloting their own “17 Rooms-U” efforts (see Box 3. 17 Rooms-U).



UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed joins the 2020 flagship summit as a keynote listener, providing rapid feedback to each Room's report-out.

BOX 3. 17 ROOMS-U

Consistent with the central role that universities can play in tackling the SDGs and other long-term societal challenges, universities have been the first movers to conduct local pilots of the 17 Rooms methodology:

- JULY 2019: In Mexico, faculty members of **Tecnológico de Monterrey (Tec)**'s National School of Social Sciences and Government conducted an early 17 Rooms pilot. The process increased awareness of the SDGs and related activities already taking place at the School. Several Rooms also advanced targeted recommendations to the university leadership's strategic planning and implementation processes. Tec's second trial of 17 Rooms in February 2020 helped more than 400 senior university council members consider Tec's role in interfacing with municipal government and industry stakeholders to jointly advance the SDGs at national and local levels.
- JULY 2019: In Spain, **Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM)** applied the principles of 17 Rooms as part of a university-wide consultation process to track SDG-specific progress toward – and identify critical actions needed to advance – key strategic missions such as achieving decarbonization of UPM by 2030. This 17 Rooms-inspired agenda has since featured in multiple settings at UPM.
- SEPTEMBER 2019: **Rutgers University** in New Jersey partnered with the **University Global Coalition** to convene a cross-university 17 Rooms-U experiment with faculty and organizational leaders from more than 65 different institutions. This demonstrated the opportunities for even a minimally-curated multi-institutional process, with each Room exploring opportunities for cross-organizational collaboration over the subsequent 12-18 months.
- MAY 2020: Pittsburgh-based **Carnegie Mellon University** conducted a virtual 17 Rooms exercise to raise awareness and solicit information from the community

– students, faculty, and staff – on how their practice, research, and education align with the SDGs. This helped inform the university's pioneering "Voluntary University Review" – a variant of the UN's country-level Voluntary National Review for the SDGs and the more recently developed city-level Voluntary Local Review.

- OCTOBER 2020: **Georgia Tech** closely modeled the 17 Rooms 2020 flagship format to develop detailed community-driven recommendations that align with and advance the themes of the Institute's new strategic plan. Connections between the flagship and local processes were fostered through a team led by the university's president, Ángel Cabrera, who helped guide the flagship's Room 17 in 2019 and 2020, with a focus on universities as hubs of societal partnership.
- DECEMBER 2020: In Canada, **University of Toronto** faculty, staff, and students convened its 17 Rooms process virtually to identify opportunities for SDG-inspired interdisciplinary research; innovation in research and teaching methods; plus strategies and models for partnerships.

Multiple campuses are planning 17 Rooms activities for 2021. For example, **George Mason University** plans to adopt and adapt the 17 Rooms methodology to discover and coordinate SDG-related research activities and experiment with how these could be linked to the university's community engagement. **The University of California, Davis** is considering using a 17 Rooms approach to identify actions that the university can take to further strengthen and accelerate SDG efforts following a Voluntary University Review. **Purchase College** in the State University of New York system plans to build on a 17 Rooms-inspired student orientation experience in 2020, to inform a broader campus effort in 2021. Other university communities have also expressed interest in student-driven 17 Rooms processes and projects.

University leaders have been particularly keen to use a 17 Rooms approach to organize local SDG discussions. Basic 17 Rooms methods offer a way to foster campus-wide awareness of disparate SDG-related activities already underway across diverse faculty, staff, students, and community stakeholders. This can provide an important reference point to improve opportunities for collaboration and SDG-relevant planning moving forward.

Importantly, there has been no single 17 Rooms-X approach to date, as different organizations organically tested permutations, informed by past flagship processes while aligning with their own circumstances and priorities. The diversity of experiences forms part of the motivation for this report, as the 17 Rooms initiative begins to codify different approaches and develop a forthcoming community of practice and public toolkit that organizations can draw from in pursuing their own processes. As Box 3 demonstrates, offshoot experiments have shown a variety of ways in which a 17 Rooms-X process can be useful. It can:

- unlock information regarding the diverse SDG interests and activities that might already be embedded across a community.
- leverage the SDGs as a tool for common conversations spanning groups that might otherwise struggle to connect across professional vocabularies and organizational reference points.
- offer a method for spurring cooperation among people who might not otherwise have the chance to do so. This can be particularly helpful if the conversations are feeding into a common process, such as a strategic plan.

How each Room approaches its task is up to local organizers and Moderators. Individual Rooms often engage in a three-phase arc of discovery and problem solving: (1) sharing relevant information, (2) identifying common priorities, and (3) refining action steps.

17 Rooms is a very useful tool for universities to accelerate SDGs implementation and interaction with local and national communities. The imperative to define concrete priorities to be achieved in 12-18 months encourages participants to take responsibility for realizing action by carefully considering pragmatic next steps.

Miguel Ruiz Cabañas Izquierdo

University Professor, Tecnológico de Monterrey

Some groups appear to generate value by moving step-wise from one phase to the next. Others appear to derive value simply by “going deep” in one or more phases. For example, Room 5 at a university might spend the majority of allocated time uncovering the breadth of research, teaching, or community-based activities related to gender equality in their university community.

Looking ahead, the 17 Rooms initiative is keen to explore new offshoot experiments with other types of entities, including cities, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and professional associations. In November 2020, Global Washington, an organization based in Seattle that supports the global development community, incorporated some elements of a 17 Rooms process into a multi-city “Goalmakers” convening initiative for the SDGs. Over 175 global development practitioners from NGOs and companies convened for 13 roundtable discussions leading to a public national forum. Learning from diverse experiments like this and others will continue to be a central thrust of the 17 Rooms approach moving forward.

WHAT NEXT?

The most important test for 17 Rooms is how it helps advance the SDGs at any scale. This report offers a first attempt to document the initiative’s history and approach. Early experiments have already revealed that carefully curated convenings within and between 17 distinct SDG constituencies might offer a compelling formula for generating new actions, insights, and communities of practice. As a practical device, 17 Rooms could become an organizing tool for every country and community seeking to step up its own actions for the SDGs. The basic approach can be as helpful for experts already steeped in global SDG processes as for grassroots community members who might not follow the same policy jargon but who care about the same issues.

Part of the 17 Rooms “special sauce” might be the way it balances inherent tensions on the path to the SDGs. By giving every goal a seat at the table, the initiative embraces both the specificity of domain expertise and the integrated nature of the SDGs as a holistic framework for economic, social, and environmental change. By encouraging participants to take a next step, not the perfect step, and emphasizing

conversations over presentations, 17 Rooms mixes authentic and unencumbered discussion spaces with an expansive and ambitious platform for advancing near-term action.

In 2021, the 17 Rooms initiative will keep updating its methods and codifying insights through a new cycle of experimentation. The annual global flagship – “version 4.0” – will continue as a virtual international process until COVID-19 is better under control and in-person meetings are again safe. Meanwhile, the secretariat will provide more systematic support to offshoot efforts, including the launch of a beta toolkit and community of practice, so that partners can more easily share learnings and insights across their own “17 Rooms-X” processes. The 17 Rooms initiative has particular interest in exploring how it might evolve to support countries, local governments, companies, and other types of actors in sparking new contributions to SDG achievement. The processes of collective problem-solving for sustainable development will merit sustained innovation efforts for many years to come.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED?



To date, 17 Rooms has been anchored in a collaborative partnership between the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation, while drawing from the leadership efforts of many key contributors to the flagship (see, for example, Appendix A) and offshoot processes (see Box 3). Looking ahead, the 17 Rooms initiative is keen to expand its circle of collaboration with other actors who are keen to advance cooperative actions for the SDGs around the world. If you are interested in joining the 17 Rooms community of discovery, design, and implementation – whether by hosting a 17 Rooms-X process or something else – please email the 17 Rooms secretariat at 17Rooms@brookings.edu.

APPENDIX A: FLAGSHIP ROOM MODERATORS SINCE INCEPTION

See [here](#) for the 2020 participant list



CO-CHAIRS

Matthew Bishop, Managing Director, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2018, 2019

Zia Khan, Senior Vice President, Innovation, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2020

John McArthur, Director, Center for Sustainable Development, Brookings Institution, 2018, 2019, 2020



Geeta Rao Gupta, Executive Director, 3D Program for Girls and Women, 2018

Michelle Nunn, President and CEO, CARE USA, 2019, 2020

Blessing Omakwu, Founder, The She Tank, 2020



Jamie Drummond, Co-founder, ONE, 2018

Gargee Ghosh, President, Global Policy and Advocacy, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2020

Homi Kharas, Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development, Brookings Institution 2019, 2020



Catarina de Albuquerque, CEO, Sanitation and Water for All, 2020

Daniel Esty, Professor of Environmental Law and Policy, Yale University, 2018

Letitia Obeng, Chair, Water Integrity Network, 2020

Betsy Otto, Director of Global Water Program, World Resources Institute, 2019

Jennifer Sara, Global Director, Water Global Practice, World Bank, 2020



Jessica Fanzo, Bloomberg Associate Professor, John Hopkins University, 2019

David Nabarro, Director, 4SD, 2018

Ruth Richardson, Executive Director, Global Alliance for the Future of Food, 2020

Roy Steiner, Senior Vice President for the Food Initiative, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2020



Aimee Christensen, Founder and Executive Director, Sun Valley Institute, 2018

Ashvin Dayal, Senior Vice President, Power Initiative, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2019, 2020

Abhijeet Sathe, COO, Softbank Energy, 2019

Michael E Webber, Chief Science and Technology Officer, ENGIE & Josey Centennial Professor in Energy Resources, University of Texas at Austin, 2020



Prabhat Jha, Professor Dalla Lana School of Public Health, University of Toronto, 2019

Naveen Rao, Managing Director, Health, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2018

Mark Smolinski, President, Ending Pandemics, 2020

Wendy Taylor, Vice President, Technical Leadership and Innovation, Jhpiego, 2020

Gavin Yamey, Director, Center for Policy Impact in Global Health, Duke University, 2019



Marcela Escobari, Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development, Brookings Institution, 2019, 2020

Sabina Dewan, President and Executive Director, Just Jobs Network, 2018

Otis Rolley, Senior Vice President, U.S. Equity and Economic Opportunity Initiative, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2020

Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO, New America, 2019



Kwame Akyeampong, Professor of International Education and Development, Open University, 2020

Emiliana Vegas, Senior Fellow and Co-Director, Center for Universal Education, Brookings Institution, 2020

Rebecca Winthrop, Senior Fellow and Co-director, Center for Universal Education, The Brookings Institution, 2018, 2019



Zia Khan, Vice President for Innovation, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2018, 2019

CV Madhukar, Managing Director, Beneficial Technology, Omidyar Network, 2020

James Mwangi, Executive Director, Dalberg Group, 2019

Kevin O'Neill, Director, Data and Technology, The Rockefeller Foundation, 2020



Martin Abregu, Vice President for International Programs, Ford Foundation, 2020

Margaret Biggs, Chairperson, International Development Research Centre, 2019, 2020

Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director, Oxfam International, 2018



Nancy Lindborg, President and CEO, the David & Lucile Packard Foundation, Former President of US Institute of Peace, 2020

Sarah Mendelson, Distinguished Service Professor of Public Policy and Head of Heinz College in Washington DC, Carnegie Mellon University, 2020

David Steven, Director, Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, 2018, 2019



James Anderson, Director of Government Innovation, Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2020

Tony Pipa, Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development, Brookings Institution, 2018, 2019, 2020

Emilia Saiz, Secretary General, United Cities and Local Governments, 2019



Ángel Cabrera, President, Georgia Institute of Technology & Chair, University Global Coalition, 2019, 2020

Daniella Ballou-Aares, Partner, Dalberg, 2018

Suzanne Fortier, Principal and Vice-chancellor, McGill University & Chair of the World Economic Forum's Global University Leaders Forum, 2020



Matthew Bishop, Co-founder, Social Progress Index & Co-founder, 17 Rooms initiative; Non-resident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution, 2020

Jessica Long, Former Managing Director, Strategy and Sustainability, Accenture, 2018, 2019, 2020

Note: Professional titles indicated as of most recent year serving as Moderator.



Manisha Bapna, Executive Vice President and Managing Director, World Resources Institute, 2019

Elizabeth Cousens, CEO, United Nations Foundation, 2018, 2019, 2020

John Podesta, Founder, Center for American Progress, 2020



Kristin Rechberger, CEO, Dynamic Planet, 2019, 2020

Enric Sala, Explorer-in-Residence, National Geographic & Executive Director, Pristine Seas, 2018, 2019, 2020



Rosina Bierbaum, Roy F. Westin Chair in Natural Economics and Research Professor, University of Maryland's School of Public Policy & Professor and Dean Emerita, University of Michigan School of Natural Resources and Environment, 2020

Tom Lovejoy, University Professor, George Mason University & Senior Fellow, UN Foundation, 2018, 2020

John Robinson, Joan L. Tweedy Chair in Conservation Strategy, Wildlife Conservation Society, 2019, 2020

