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REPORT BY
THE 17 ROOMS
SECRETARIAT

Great Transitions

Doubling down on the
Sustainable Development Goals

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Contents

Executive summary	iii
I. Pandemic as prologue	1
II. The Great Transitions	7
1. Towards justice for all.....	9
2. Towards blue-green replenishment.....	13
3. Towards equitable technology infrastructure.....	17
4. Towards generational transition.....	20
III. Doubling down on 2021	23

Executive summary

This year has exposed the world's extraordinary fragility. Managing a pandemic is hard enough. Doing so while addressing other urgent stresses—like inequality, violence, and climate change—adds to the degree of difficulty. What should be done to move forward? This was the question tackled by 17 Rooms 2020, a yearly convening of leading experts and practitioners brought together by the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation to channel ideas and energy into actions for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

COVID-19 and related crises have made the SDGs even more important, according to this year's 17 Rooms summit participants. The goals offer a “North Star” to help steer longer-horizon efforts out of crisis. But the shifting global context requires a new outlook. What should this prioritize? Inspired by the insights of the 17 different “Rooms,” or working groups, we boil it down to four Great Transitions: for justice, for the environment, for technology, and for the next generation. These transitions represent a series of burgeoning global changes that still require a doubling down of effort in order to succeed.

Towards justice for all: From tackling economic and social inequalities independently to recoupling economic and social progress for everyone. Inequalities are complex, often interconnected, and created by both market forces and power imbalances. Whether they stem from discrimination, lack of access to economic opportunity, gaps in basic public services, or misuse of political power, they prevent people, communities, and countries from reaching their full potential. Recent years have seen a decoupling of economic growth from social progress in many countries. A recoupling is required, one that addresses power imbalances and root causes of inequality in the pursuit of basic justice for all. The world needs to double down on the transition from rhetoric to practice in leaving no one behind. Whether confronting gender inequality, extreme poverty, community-level challenges, or barriers in the job market, change must empower people to chart their own trajectories and topple the full range of norms that hinder opportunity.

Towards blue-green replenishment: From valuing natural capital at the margin to actively stewarding nature at scale. In addition to the global pandemic, ecosystem imbalances are still stoking wildfires in major economies, unleashing hurricanes on urban shores, collapsing fisheries for many maritime workers, and seeding drought across vast swathes of farmland. Doubling down to protect nature requires a transition in protecting both the “blue” of the skies, oceans, and natural waters plus the “green” of land-based ecosystems. Economic incentives can help shore up and replenish natural assets that fuel human activity and prosperity. But today's operative questions too frequently still focus on incremental improvements in the rate of depleting nature. A more central question is to ask what scale of investment or protection is required in

order to ensure a successful balance between humanity and the planet that supports all societies. Nature needs new protection targets, policy instruments, narratives, and methods of measurement to change course.

Towards equitable technology infrastructure: From celebrating novel applications to building inclusive systems for innovation. Doubling down on technology's promise requires an updated approach to defining technological success. Many of the world's most powerful recent breakthroughs can be held in the palm of a hand. Yet, the business, social, and political responses to some innovations have arrived so quickly that many technologies originally meant to foster opportunity instead foster divides, in both understanding and access. The world needs to shift from an emphasis on individual product breakthroughs to the pursuit of technology infrastructure breakthroughs, in a manner that both solves current problems and garners public faith in equitable access to future innovations. COVID-19 has shown the upside of successful digital infrastructure and integrated disease surveillance networks, when countries can track, trace, and respond to the virus's spread, while respecting data privacy concerns. Modern energy infrastructure is essential to help empower other technologies, using renewable sources to the greatest extent possible. Creative approaches to public incentives and pooled purchasing power can help drive equitable access for all.

Towards generational transition: From preparing young people for the future to partnering with next generation leadership today. The pandemic has created a fresh generational divide. Lifetime learning gaps may never close, and only be amplified by other stresses. A generational transition requires redoubled attention to young people, both to preempt potential catastrophic lifelong losses and to give youth greater direct say in humanity's future. It is time for legacy leaders to start transitioning responsibilities toward the cohorts who will define society's coming frontiers. The world needs to keep pushing the boundaries of the remote learning shift to expand the circle of who gets to learn, and what they learn. More expansive approaches to investing in young people can help new forms of leadership emerge. More explicit intergenerational alliances will be required across all segments of society.

Doubling down on 2021

As the world looks to a new calendar year, success hinges on collective efforts to confront common issues at full scale. The leading definitions of underlying progress are still embedded in the SDGs. A shared focus on four Great Transitions can guide energies toward a more inclusive and resilient world for all. This year's 17 Rooms flagship process provides grounds for optimism. Everyone can contribute. The opportunity is a world of inclusion, resilience, and sustainability for all.

I.

**Pandemic
as prologue**

This year has exposed the world's extraordinary fragility. A microscopic virus, likely first transmitted from bat to human, has upended billions of lives. More than a million people have already died. More than [a billion children have been affected by school closures](#). Inequalities have driven an unfair distribution of the burdens, while inflaming prior grievances. About [\\$6 trillion has been lost](#) from the global economy so far. Global leadership and willingness to cooperate have been found wanting.

Managing a pandemic is hard enough. Doing so while addressing other urgent stresses—like climate change, discrimination, and violence—adds to the degree of difficulty. The challenge is further heightened in the face of what may soon become recurrent interlocking patterns of environmental, economic, and social disruption.

What should be done to move forward? How can the world find a way out of this mess?

These were the questions tackled by participants in 17 Rooms 2020 (see Box 1), a yearly convening of leading experts and practitioners brought together by the Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation to channel ideas and energy into actions for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As global objectives for people, planet, and prosperity, the SDGs were agreed by all countries in 2015, although under very different circumstances.

Do the goals even matter anymore amid a period of such widespread and prolonged crisis? The answer is a resolute yes, according to roughly 160 participants in this year's virtual 17 Rooms summit, who gathered in September, on the eve of the U.N. General Assembly. There was a consensus around the SDGs as a "North Star" to guide action out of the crisis—a neutral reference point to help tackle systemic underlying challenges and steer efforts toward a better long-term horizon. As one participant put it, the interconnected nature of the crisis has prompted the same change in thinking the SDGs were already trying to initiate five years before.

First steps on a new path can be taken in 2021. Major U.N. summits on climate change, biodiversity, desertification, and food systems offer some unique formal opportunities to chart a better course. But countless economic, social, and environmental decisions will also be taken across the globe by other special international conferences—like the Generation Equality Forum—alongside government cabinets, corporate boardrooms, community gatherings, and individual households. Progress will ultimately hinge on the extent to which high-level global policy debates sync up with the ground-level challenges people are confronting in all the domains where they work and live.

One of today's great challenges in promoting widespread cooperation is that everyone experiences the current crisis so differently. As one microcosm of this dynamic, a 17 Rooms pre-summit poll asked participants about their views on COVID-19, the SDGs, and prospects for progress (Box 2). Apart from an overwhelming belief that the goals are more relevant than ever, the results showed that perspectives varied considerably

by SDG community, in terms of how this year's pandemic and related crises had affected outlooks. Nonetheless, most groups believed that broader changes triggered by crisis need to prompt new mindsets. The changing global environment needs to be navigated and harnessed in order to drive new results.

What should a fresh outlook prioritize? We boil it down to four Great Transitions: for justice, for the environment, for technology, and for the next generation. These are written from the perspective of the 17 Rooms secretariat, drawing inspiration from the 17 different "Rooms" (working groups) in this year's annual flagship process. Each

Box 1. 17 Rooms: A new approach

17 Rooms offers a new way of channeling collaborative energy and ideas into practical steps for the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Brookings Institution and The Rockefeller Foundation first launched the initiative in September 2018 in New York City, on the eve of the U.N. General Assembly, as an experimental gathering with more than 100 people joining. The meeting aimed to foster a fun and action-oriented approach to convening 17 disparate specialist communities, all under the same roof.

Within the 17 Rooms process, each SDG-focused working group meets as a "Room" to identify, in parallel and in concert, opportunities for cooperation over the subsequent 12-18 months. Guided by the pursuit of "a next step" rather than "a perfect step," participants meet in their personal capacities to engage in candid and informal discussions. By identifying openings for progress within an SDG, rather than attempting to cover the waterfront of each entire SDG, Rooms generate a mix of expert-driven insights plus momentum for practical action. As of the second annual flagship session in New York in September 2019, Rooms meet both to consider their own priorities for near-term action and to explore perspectives on opportunities across Goals.

In 2020, 17 Rooms went entirely virtual. Most Rooms met a couple of times from June through mid-September. Then, on September 21st, a culminating virtual summit brought all the Rooms together to offer feedback on each other's proposals, to explore opportunities for collaboration, and to report out on priority opportunities in 2021. U.N. Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed joined as "keynote listener," providing feedback on all the Rooms' lead ideas.

The 17 Rooms initiative continues to evolve and refine its methods. At the global level, the annual flagship process maintains a focus on international policy issues. In parallel, the project secretariat is collaborating with universities and other communities to pilot the 17 Rooms methodologies in support of localized forms of cooperation. In 2021, these "17 Rooms-U" and "17 Rooms-X" efforts aim to broaden opportunities for SDG engagement and action, empowered by forthcoming toolkits and a growing community of practice.

individual Room has published its own actionable insights in a [companion series](#) of short documents. This report distills from, and builds upon, those documents to describe a set of essential overarching shifts—from today’s world of fragility and inequity to one of resilience and equal opportunity. Importantly, the SDGs already embody the same basic vision. The four transitions offer a fresh take as a guiding reference point out of crisis.

“No one wants to go back to normal,” a wise 17 Rooms participant suggested, since the pre-COVID-19 era clearly wasn’t working well enough to avert the current situation. No magic reset button is available to reclaim a simple feeling of normalcy either. This year has revealed a torrent of policy shortcomings at global, national, and local levels, which can only be addressed through the long, hard work of building new and more equitable approaches to managing interconnected economic, social, and environmental frontiers.

Admittedly, some observers might wonder whether it is too soon to focus on big transitions or longer-term SDG visions. The Goals were not on track even prior to COVID-19, some may say, so efforts need to focus on ending an acute situation with no clear end in sight.

We take a different view. The time is right for a new outlook, one that doubles down on the SDGs. For example, the crisis has shown the volume of resources that can be made available at short notice, when a situation is deemed fully urgent. Some [\\$12 trillion has already been mobilized by governments](#) to shore up communities and companies. True, most of the money has so far been deployed in advanced economies. But many governments still have the capacity to borrow much more, at historically low interest rates, so additional trillions may well be deployed soon.

Given the enormity of these volumes, it is imperative that the resources drive towards constructive long-term outcomes across all countries. This will not be easy at a time when a growing number of lower-income countries face high risk of a debt crisis. But it is possible. Global public and political attention are already focusing on social inequities in an unprecedented way. The SDGs are the best available guidepost for public and private incentives to promote inclusion, sustainability, and prosperity for all.

Amid the pandemic, several major economies are also pressing ahead with near-term plans to meet long-term objectives. For instance, Europe, the U.K., China, Japan, and Korea have all made high-profile commitments to achieve carbon neutrality by specific respective deadlines over the next few decades. The crisis may be redirecting many policy efforts but, in some cases, it is simply re-anchoring them in longer-term ambitions. Crucially, changes in technology also call for ongoing updates in approaches to problem-solving. The tools of progress tomorrow will commonly shift from those used today. When such changes come quickly and dramatically, they provide opportunities for progress on problems that simply felt too hard before.

Moreover, the SDGs are continuing quietly to gain strength as a salient reference point among diverse constituencies around the world. What began as an agreement among sovereign states has diffused across sectors, communities, and levels of government. Dozens of cities are aligning their municipal strategies with the SDGs. Major companies are increasingly citing the goals as a baseline for new stakeholder accounting metrics. Universities are collaborating in a [global coalition](#) for the SDGs while new indices rank academic institutions based on their SDG alignment. Carnegie Mellon University even recently published the first “voluntary university review,” mirroring the official country-level process for reporting efforts towards the goals. SDG norms only continue to grow in scale and resonance.

Box 2. Many sides of the SDG elephant

One of the SDGs’ great strengths lies in bringing so many diverse constituencies together, as happens in the 17 Rooms initiative. An underappreciated flip side is that each of those constituencies brings its own outlook to SDG debates. Different perspectives bubble up even when asking a simple question such as, “What are the odds of SDG success?” Everyone sees their own side of the proverbial elephant.

This dynamic was on full display in a pre-meeting survey of participants in this year’s 17 Rooms virtual summit. As shown in the table below, domain experts from all 17 working groups overwhelmingly considered COVID-19 and related crises to have made the SDGs more important as a global policy priority. But the similarities ended there.

For instance, when asked how ambitious their original SDG targets were even prior to COVID-19, Room 6 members (focused on water and sanitation) flagged the objectives as somewhat tougher than, say, Room 13 (focused on climate change). As for whether COVID-19 had driven an increase or decrease in attention on their issues, experts focused on health (Room 3), inequality (Room 10), and cities (Room 11) reported a solid boost, whereas leaders for the oceans (Room 14) reported a decline.

Importantly, the perceived level of attention does not correlate with optimism for 2021 progress. Despite a sense of heightened awareness, the inequality-focused Room 10 felt most pessimistic about the coming year. The education group (Room 4) expressed similar levels of concern. Looking further ahead to 2030, the groups focused on digital infrastructure (Room 9) and universities as hubs of societal partnership (Room 17) were most upbeat. But the majority of groups also felt substantial changes in approach will be required to drive action in a post-COVID-19 world.

The SDGs pull a vast range of technical, political, and geographic perspectives onto the same page, literally and figuratively. The 17 Rooms process strives to help them all learn from each other.

Q1: Do you consider COVID-19 and related 2020 crises to have made the SDGs less important or more important as a global policy priority?

(1 = Much less important, 9 = Much more important)

Q2: Before this year's crises took shape, how ambitious did you consider your (Room's) SDG targets to be?

(1 = Not ambitious at all, 9 = Extremely ambitious)

Q3: Do you perceive COVID-19 and related 2020 crises to have shifted attention toward or away from your Room's substantive priorities?

(1 = Big drop in attention, 9 = Big increase in attention)

Q4: Next year, in 2021, what is the likelihood of global progress on your Room's overarching SDG priorities?

(1 = No progress likely, 9 = Huge progress likely)

Q5: Over the coming decade, by 2030, what is the likelihood of global progress on your Room's overarching SDG priorities?

(1 = No progress likely, 9 = SDG likely to be achieved successfully)

Q6: Post-2020, how much of a change in approach will COVID-19 and associated crises require to drive action on your Room's SDG?

(1 = Stay the course; no change required, 9 = Radical change required)

Room/SDG	Focus	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6
1	Poverty	7.6	6.7	5.7	5.7	6.2	7.8
2	Food	8.2	6.2	6.8	4.8	6.1	7.5
3	Health	7.9	7.0	8.3	6.5	7.1	7.0
4	Education	6.9	7.1	6.2	4.3	6.1	7.0
5	Gender	8.5	6.7	6.4	6.0	6.8	6.6
6	Water/sanitation	8.1	7.9	6.5	5.4	5.9	6.9
7	Energy	8.3	6.2	6.4	6.0	6.7	6.4
8	Jobs	8.1	6.0	6.8	5.3	6.6	5.3
9	Digital	7.8	6.8	7.5	6.9	7.6	6.2
10	Inequality	7.6	6.1	8.8	3.8	5.0	7.3
11	Cities	8.2	6.3	8.5	6.0	6.5	7.2
12	Waste	7.8	6.6	5.6	4.9	7.0	6.4
13	Climate	7.4	6.2	5.3	5.9	5.9	7.6
14	Oceans	8.3	7.6	3.9	5.5	6.9	8.0
15	Biodiversity	8.5	7.3	5.6	5.8	5.6	6.8
16	Institutions	7.6	6.2	7.0	6.3	6.5	7.5
17	Universities	8.2	6.7	6.3	6.5	7.3	6.3
Overall average		7.9	6.7	6.5	5.7	6.5	6.9



Lowest average for question



Highest average for question

Source: Survey taken of participants in the Brookings-Rockefeller Foundation 17 Rooms 2020 flagship virtual summit.
Note: Results show the average response for each SDG-focused Room.

III.

**The Great
Transitions**

To help crystalize the tasks at hand, the Great Transitions distill four intersecting shifts required for the world to move from its current situation to a more resilient and inclusive place. The transitions and their descriptions below are inspired by, and anchored in, actionable ideas emerging from across the 17 Rooms community. The transitions represent a series of burgeoning global changes that still require a doubling down of efforts in order to succeed. They distill a renewed path to the SDGs. Most important, they offer organizing concepts to help channel widespread societal energies seeking to figure out “What should we do next?”

In the following pages we describe each transition, accompanied by illustrative near-term actions that could help advance them in 2021. In pursuit of fresh thinking and new solutions, these transitions are intended to spark discussion. Consider them a first version for debate. We plan to revisit and update the concepts as the world progresses on its major challenges over the weeks and months ahead.

1

Towards justice for all

From tackling economic and social inequalities independently to recoupling economic and social progress for everyone

2

Towards blue-green replenishment

From valuing natural capital at the margin to actively stewarding nature at scale

3

Towards equitable technology infrastructure

From celebrating novel applications to building inclusive systems for innovation

4

Towards generational transition

From preparing young people for the future to partnering with next generation leadership

1. *Towards justice for all*

From tackling economic and social inequalities independently to recoupling economic and social progress for everyone

Inequalities are complex, often interconnected, and created by both market forces and power imbalances. When left unaddressed—as the pandemic has clearly shown—unequal societies are vulnerable to cascading tragedies like loss of income, home, community, or even life. Whether inequities stem from discrimination, lack of access to economic opportunity, gaps in basic public services, or misuse of political power, they prevent people, communities, and countries from reaching their full potential. Recent years have seen a decoupling of economic growth from social progress in many countries. A recoupling is required, one that addresses power imbalances and root causes of inequality in the pursuit of basic justice for all.

The world needs to double down on the transition from rhetoric to practice in leaving no one behind—whether due to race, class, gender, indigenous status, geography, sexual orientation, or any other form of discrimination. Change must fully empower people to chart their own trajectories and topple the full range of norms that might have blocked opportunity until now.

This year's 17 Rooms process identified a diverse array of issues requiring new approaches to justice, spanning different scales of global-to-local action. At the forefront of these, gender equality demands a sweeping review of obstacles and action across all 17 SDGs. [COVID-19 has exacerbated many profound gender inequalities](#)—in the workplace, in education, in access to health care, in personal security, and in burdens carried within the home—that can only be addressed through multi-pronged actions throughout society. This must begin by broadening the coalitions of men and women—not just the gender specialists—who fight for gender equality across all domains. It also requires more proactive, measurable efforts to build leadership opportunities for diverse women, in all industries and sectors.

People living in extreme poverty experience the most acute forms of inequality, living off less than \$1.90 a day per person (measured in 2011 purchasing power parity dollars). For the first time in decades, extreme poverty is forecast to rise this year, climbing by as many as [120 million people](#). In some geographies, future economic growth could help offset the near-term poverty increase. But the challenge is much tougher in countries that need to tackle deeper structural reform while recovering

from the pandemic. Recovery also needs to address practical constraints, like the fact that [two billion people lack access to basic sanitation and three billion people lack access to basic handwashing at home](#), perhaps the most essential form of “personal protective equipment.”

Entire countries are being left behind too. During the pandemic, countries least able to withstand economic shocks have had the least emergency resources available to move forward. The poorest countries are spending a much smaller share of their national incomes in crisis response, about 1 to 3% of gross domestic product (GDP), which is a small fraction of the sometimes 25% of GDP their higher-income peers have mobilized. While some low-income countries have been allowed to suspend some debt repayment temporarily, they cannot meet all the basic needs of crucial safety nets for their people.

Meanwhile, middle-income countries, many of which still fail to meet the needs of large pockets of extreme poverty, fare somewhat better, but largely fend for themselves in the international system. They are stuck in the middle—not poor enough for emergency support, yet not rich enough to finance a robust local response. In the face of a common pandemic foe, the global financing system needs to ensure all countries get the resources they require to provide basic services to everyone.

Across all levels of government, actions to address inequality hinge on the just allocation of public resources. Just is the operative word. As governments mobilize trillions of dollars in emergency financing, there is worrisome potential for funneling funds to privileged or corrupt interests rather than to those facing the greatest suffering. People most acutely in need of relief should have a say in how resources are directed. In this regard, the pandemic presents an opportunity to update the social contract and the politics of power. The SDGs offer a naturally objective framework to guide such conversations and track new public spending against results, including how resources are being used to reduce inequalities.

For their part, local leaders are playing a central role in tackling COVID-19’s ground-level consequences and can play a pivotal role in advancing community-level transitions toward justice for all. Cities often form the front line of promoting inclusion and cohesion. Unfortunately, too many higher levels of government have neglected municipalities during the crisis, limiting the flow of life-saving funds, expertise or supplies. Cities need more resources and agency to shore up local resilience. Post-pandemic, recovery funds will offer a way both to get people back to work and to build or fortify local levers of economic and social inclusion. But for this, cities require much greater access to affordable finance, in lower-income countries in particular.

Justice in livelihoods also requires equitable opportunities for advancement in the workplace. Most workers get ahead by changing jobs, either within their organization or at a new employer. To do this, they need basic labor protections, with standards

set by government regulators and fair practices by employers. Private companies need to do their part too, especially in laying the groundwork for upwardly mobile jobs among their own low-wage workers, who are disproportionately female and often from minority groups. Even in the high-income U.S., both employers and essential workers often fail to invest in the skills, job quality, or career trajectory of those who earn the least. This creates a negative cycle for both employers and employees, resulting in low workforce engagement, unfulfilled staff, and high turnover. To right the trend onto an upward slope, policymakers, corporate chiefs, and labor leaders need to promote firm-level indicators tracking economic mobility for workers who need it most.

Actions for 2021

At a tactical level, this year's 17 Rooms discussions surfaced a range of actions that illustrate how focused efforts can advance justice for all in 2021. These include:

- **Launching a #JustRecovery campaign:** A global, multi-stakeholder campaign can advocate for, and help institutionalize, inclusivity and transparency in COVID-19 recovery and longer-term sustainable development efforts. It will be crucial to track public spending and its impacts on populations affected by COVID-19. Efforts should include an emphasis on data collection related to justice needs and engagement with grassroots organizations to amplify the voice of vulnerable communities in program design and implementation.
- **Promoting widespread implementation of fiscal distribution metrics:** In March 2020, the U.N.'s official SDG reporting framework adopted a new indicator, SDG 10.2.4, to measure the redistributive impact of fiscal policies. As a key element of COVID-19 responses, all countries and their partners can ensure the necessary annual data collection and reporting systems are in place to track how government policies and programs are affecting income inequalities within societies.
- **Creating a new Liquidity and Sustainability Facility:** As a proposal gaining support from international and private financial institutions, this facility would provide foreign exchange credit to banks and businesses in lower risk developing countries at much more affordable rates, thereby helping them stay afloat financially through the pandemic.
- **Expanding municipal access to global finance:** Cross-border sharing of public and private funds earmarked for cities would help local leaders ensure their communities remain physically and economically strong in the short-term while shoring up equity and sustainability for the long-term. The Global Urban Resilience Fund recently proposed by the Urban 20 (U20) is one important example to this end.

- **Crowdsourcing breakthrough messaging for gender equality:** The lead up to the 2021 Generation Equality Forum offers an opportunity to inject new energy into the gender equality narrative. A crowdsourced contest for breakthrough approaches to messaging around gender equality can draw in leading talent from a broad range of creative industries and mediums.
- **Convening a “last mile alliance”:** Tackling the toughest challenges of extreme deprivation and pockets of poverty within countries of all income levels requires targeted collective attention from governments, multilateral agencies, philanthropies, civil society, and the private sector. A common platform for planning, testing solutions, and peer-to-peer learning could help ensure the most severe poverty challenges receive elevated and sustained attention through the 2030 SDG deadline. Such an alliance can start by advancing the availability of essential economic and social services for all, as universally agreed in the U.N.’s 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda.
- **Advancing a campaign to finance WASH as PPE:** A policy advocacy campaign could place special emphasis on mobilizing funding for universal access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), as a crucial COVID-19 prevention measure upon which other sectors depend. Major public investments in WASH could also potentially help create millions of jobs, often for lower-skilled workers.
- **Upping the S in ESG metrics:** New metrics can update companies’ traditional economic, social, and governance (ESG) reporting frameworks to track corporate investments in, and corresponding opportunities for, mobility among low-wage workers. In the United States, a streamlined set of outcome measures can be used and championed by existing coalitions of business, government, and nonprofit stakeholders, at the state and local levels.

2. *Towards blue-green replenishment*

From valuing natural capital at the margin to actively stewarding nature at scale

Leaders from science and business are increasingly recognizing the value that natural capital contributes to economic and societal success. But ecosystem imbalances are still stoking wildfires in major economies, unleashing hurricanes on urban shores, collapsing fisheries for many maritime workers, and seeding drought across vast swathes of farmland. Consistent with this, the World Economic Forum ranked [biodiversity loss as one of the top risks facing humanity](#) by 2030. The urgent strains of crossing “[planetary boundaries](#)” need to be reversed as quickly as possible.

Doubling down to protect nature requires a transition in protecting both the “blue” of the skies, oceans, and natural waters in addition to the “green” of land-based ecosystems. During the early days of the pandemic in 2020, pauses in industrial activity showed how the overworked planet that nurtures us not only needs to heal, but can be restored. This is in keeping with scientific evidence showing that depleted oceans, for example, [can regenerate life systems fairly quickly](#) once full protection measures are implemented. However, such measures too rarely take effect.

At their core, the imbalances between humanity and nature stem from a basic failure to manage healthy ecosystems and the biosphere. The cost of protecting ecosystems is often less than that of responding to societal problems resulting from ecosystem degradation, including zoonotic diseases, invasive species, and coastal flooding. At the margin, economic incentives can help shore up and replenish natural assets that fuel human activity and prosperity. But the pandemic and its responses underscore just how far the world is falling short in its stewardship task. Doubling or tripling the share of marine areas protected, for example, will not solve the imbalances if only a sliver of marine areas is protected in the first place. Similarly, slowing the rate of biodiversity loss will not ensure the ongoing regeneration of life systems any more than doubling the scale of clean energy production will solve the greenhouse gas problem, when full decarbonization is ultimately required. Today’s operative questions too frequently still focus on incremental improvements in the rate of depleting nature. A more central question is to ask what scale of investment or protection is required to ensure a successful balance between humanity and a healthy planet that supports all societies.

Budget constraints still matter. Resources must be prioritized for the most fundamental challenges at hand. For this reason, a major rethink of public subsidies is essential. Current fiscal incentives too rarely favor ecologically and carbon friendly ways to generate and deliver essential goods and services—food being a prominent example of massive waste. Public subsidies too often support ecologically damaging activities, like industrial fishing and fossil fuel use.

Again, the time is right for a new approach. As a result of COVID-19, three milestone global summits have been rescheduled from 2020 to 2021: one on climate change, another on biodiversity, and a third on combating desertification. Each will set the guiding principles and targets for the coming generation, at least out to 2030. A separate U.N. Food Systems Summit will also explore how to embed sustainability in the production of safe, affordable, and nutritious food.

Each of these events merits decisive efforts to lay the groundwork for investments in, and conservation of, the nature-based solutions that underpin human prosperity. The U.K.-hosted climate summit, for example, is the pivotal follow-up moment to the seminal 2015 Paris Agreement and an essential political deadline for countries to update and enhance their climate ambition. Meanwhile, the China-hosted biodiversity summit is seeking to set new ecosystem management targets for countries to reach by 2030. A major “30 by 30” campaign is underway leading up to the summit, aiming to protect 30% of the planet for conservation by 2030. The summit on desertification can achieve breakthroughs in advancing global targets for Land Degradation Neutrality. The Food Systems Summit presents an opportunity to define and refine global challenges that interact with all of humanity’s sources of nourishment.

Importantly, oceans can no longer be overlooked as a priority for stewardship. Roughly [82% of fish stocks](#) are overfished today and, as of late 2020, [less than 8% of the global ocean has been designated or proposed as protected areas, with only 2.6% fully protected](#). This is far short of the existing SDG commitment to protect 10% by 2020. Oceans need strategic, effective protection and management—to stop overfishing; to limit the run-off of plastics, sewage, industrial toxins, and agricultural nutrients; to prevent acidification; and to protect the minimally governed high seas from predatory extraction. Existing technologies and approaches to protected areas can help replenish fish stocks and regenerate ocean health if backed by the reallocation of harmful subsidies. But the transition to protection at scale is required.

A related challenge lies in the problem of waste. Global resource extraction has [more than tripled since 1970](#), prompting widespread scientific concerns about the fallout from breakneck patterns of production and consumption. To achieve a truly circular economy—one that fully channels today’s waste and excess into new materials and products, the world needs new infrastructure, corporate standards, laws, sources of funding, and supply chains. Again, COVID-19 response packages can provide a crucial

entry point for circular economy strategies, particularly in cities that are tackling so much of the recovery effort.

The world can begin to tackle these herculean blue-green tasks through a combination of scaled incentives, resources, protected areas, and operating innovations. Nature needs new policy instruments, fresh narratives, and more modern methods of measurement and monitoring to persuade governments and companies to change course. For example, True Cost Accounting is an emerging field of practice to capture the broader environmental and societal costs not directly reflected in the price of food. Equally, we need a transition toward economic incentives that move the needle, like a price on carbon, and blue-green strings on any bailouts to spur countries and companies to adopt better practices. Some form of “global subsidy summit” may well be merited, to reorient public dollars towards these goals.

The trillions of public sector dollars in COVID-19 response and recovery packages offer a pathway to expand investments in the natural underpinnings of all societies. Governments and international financial institutions need to prioritize and accelerate a fundamental shift toward green infrastructure and jobs. One of this year’s 17 Rooms working groups recommends a significant share of all multilateral and bilateral development funds be targeted directly at biodiversity conservation, with all dollars subject to a “do no harm” filter for natural ecosystems. For its part, the European Green Deal can open a global conversation showing that using nature-based solutions to avoid the risks of ecosystem loss—including infectious and zoonotic diseases—is smarter and healthier than the status quo. China’s approaches to an ecological “red line” could do the same. A major sustainable infrastructure strategy could promote employment and economic growth in the U.S. too.

Actions for 2021

This year’s 17 Rooms process identified a range of action areas that could help advance blue-green priorities in 2021. Again, these are more illustrative than definitive, offering a sense of opportunities for action. They include:

- **Embedding 30% protection targets in the 2021 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) summit:** The intergovernmental Conference of Parties meeting for the CBD can formalize overarching policy targets to protect 30% of the planet by 2030. Appropriately framed, these targets can then guide national policymaking and advocacy for the decade.
- **Launching a G-20 green infrastructure and jobs initiative:** The G-20 can provide global strategic coordination and direction to a green infrastructure and jobs drive by national governments, as well as a way to channel major overseas investment flows toward green investment through the international financial institutions and the Belt and Road Initiative.

- **Creating a circular city accelerator:** Cities can form the front line for promoting circular economy practices. An accelerator initiative can help a coalition of participating cities and partners to create, own and implement best practices, while also mobilizing targeted resources.
- **Advancing True Cost Accounting case studies:** Leading up to the 2021 U.N. Food Systems Summit, building new awareness of True Cost Accounting practices could, over time, help shift food production towards regenerative and eco-friendly approaches. It will be important to collect, share, and promote case studies that show how companies and nations can assign monetary value to the ecological outcomes of helpful and harmful farming and livestock practices.

3. *Towards equitable technology infrastructure*

From celebrating novel applications to building inclusive systems for innovation

Doubling down on technology's promise requires an updated approach to defining technological success. Many of the world's most powerful recent breakthroughs can be held in the palm of a hand. Mobile digital technologies have revolutionized everything from the way people communicate to how they commute. The nanoscience of genomics and other health technologies are transforming the way people fend off disease. Advances in the physics and chemistry of renewable energy generation and storage are helping expand access to crucial services while curtailing carbon emissions.

Yet, the business, social, and political responses to some innovations have arrived so quickly that many technologies originally meant to foster opportunity instead foster divides in both understanding and access. The race to develop a COVID-19 vaccine presents just one variant of the challenge. Extraordinary scientific breakthroughs offer hope for a roll-out in 2021. But many countries and institutions aim to hoard access for their own people, and breakdowns in public trust leave it unclear how many people will even want to use a vaccine. The world needs to shift from emphasizing individual product breakthroughs to the pursuing technology infrastructure breakthroughs, in a manner that both solves current problems and garners public faith in equitable access to future innovations.

COVID-19 has shown the upside of sound digital infrastructure when countries can track, trace, and respond to the virus's spread in a timely way. The pandemic has also exposed many countries' gaps in the use of relevant technologies. For this and any future epidemics, outbreak surveillance capabilities need to be built up in regions where systems are weak or fragmented, particularly at the nexus of technology, expertise, and local protocols. For platforms to work, human know-how needs to align with the health care infrastructure. New collaborative approaches are required to coordinate diverse disease monitoring and forecasting organizations. Improving the ground-level

collection of data and its corresponding analysis in hospitals, labs, and public health institutions can help thwart future epidemics across geographies.

The digital revolution will continue to form a crucial pillar of the required overarching transition. In countries with low levels of internet access, digitalization can open doors to everything ranging from birth registration to land and business registration, to distance learning opportunities for children, and social protection payments for people in poverty. An African Digital Transformation has been proposed as a “digital moonshot” for the region, where [only 3 in 10 people currently use the internet](#). Within years, such a moonshot could help hundreds of millions of people leapfrog on everything from access to bank accounts to public services and job opportunities.

More broadly, countries at all levels of digital access are wrestling with complex challenges of public data oversight. Major companies often serve as gatekeepers to the online world. A new type of organization needs to help promote access while protecting the ownership and use of private data. When paired with competition and transparency safeguards, such an agency can help ensure digital social goods so that people can access and control data about their own lives, especially in countries with limited connectivity to date. A new international entity could support open software, systems, and standards, while helping to build local digital capacity, and promote basic access and use policies.

Naturally, such digital infrastructure needs to be powered by modern energy infrastructure, using renewable sources to the greatest extent possible. Again, the basic service gaps are most severe in sub-Saharan Africa, where nearly half the population lacks access to electricity. Overcoming energy poverty is a lever to addressing other forms of poverty. The region’s infrastructure strategies thus need multi-pronged efforts to promote access to rapidly evolving energy technologies, which in turn fuel access to other advancing technologies.

Looking forward, the rising share of renewables in the energy supply will likely accelerate across all regions due to rapid and ongoing declines in the cost of solar, wind, and hydro technologies. But debates over how best to organize the generation and transmission of renewable energy in low-income environments unduly pit on- and off-grid systems against each other. The same goes for small- versus large-scale approaches. A transition needs to avoid these false choices, because blended approaches are required. At a practical level, aggregate purchase and volume guarantees for renewable technologies in underserved regions can help utilities, regulators, and policymakers move such efforts forward.

An equitable shift to renewable energy systems will require better public incentives and resource allocations. For example, green hydrogen may bring a unique value proposition to sectors that are hard to transition, like heavy industry, freight, and trucking. The EU and Japan are already piloting scalable efforts in these domains. Across the board, the

integration of improved health, digital, and energy technology infrastructures can help underpin many other dimensions of the Great Transition toward more equitable and sustainable prosperity for all.

Actions for 2021

This year's 17 Rooms process identified a range of actions that could help advance a new approach to technology infrastructure in 2021. These include:

- **Connecting epidemic sentinel networks:** Coordinating existing disease monitoring and forecasting entities can generate a modern data and analytics network to focus on new and emerging viruses and disease vectors. An emphasis on novel data sources, data quality, data timeliness, and transparency can help accelerate efficient responses to future epidemic avoidance.
- **Creating pooled procurement for renewable energy technologies in frontier markets:** Ongoing advances in renewable technologies, especially battery storage and solar, can be harnessed by mobilizing purchasing scale to serve under-served populations, especially through distributed electrification systems. Aggregating purchasing commitments and volume guarantees across large and small companies can reduce costs, expand access, and create opportunities for disruptive technology, driving huge potential gains in sub-Saharan Africa in particular.
- **Piloting equitable digital public infrastructure:** A new type of international organization to promote equitable digital infrastructure could be advanced by assembling a broad coalition of supporters to champion full implementation of such an infrastructure in one country or region to start. The core undertaking could range from basic data policies to digital identities to basic applications for education or health services.

4. Towards generational transition

From preparing young people for the future to partnering with next generation leadership

The pandemic has created a fresh generational divide. Earlier this year, 1.5 billion children were shut out of classrooms within a matter of weeks. Hundreds of millions are [still learning from home, at least when available resources permit](#). Education budgets are under pressure, exactly when teachers and schools need extra support to adjust to the pandemic. Millions of children, particularly girls, may drop out of school for good, while those who stay risk falling permanently behind. Lifetime learning gaps may never close, and perhaps grow due to nutritional gaps and other stresses. Meanwhile, countless millions of youth are already struggling to find jobs amid the most severe economic downturn in decades. A generational transition requires redoubled attention to young people, both to preempt potential catastrophic lifelong losses and to give youth greater direct say in humanity's future.

When classrooms do reopen, expanded approaches to grade school education will form a crucial part of the transition. Massive investments in remedial classes will be required to support children who have been out of school. Investments in healthy physical environments will also be essential. Too many schools lack the core infrastructure to protect children from basic health risks and school days lost to illness. [More than 3 in 10 schools globally](#) still need clean water or decent toilets, both of which amount to essential “PPE” against the coronavirus and other infectious diseases.

New approaches are required for investing in young adults too. This year showed how quickly universities and colleges can adjust business models and operating practices. COVID-19 has already transformed how post-secondary students learn. But the world needs to keep pushing the boundaries of the remote learning shift, to expand the circle of who gets to learn and—critically important—what they learn. Institutions of higher learning will need to partner with each other and with external organizations on new curriculum development approaches. Empowered by better technology infrastructure, new interfaces between learning and practice will be essential, as will new forms of peer exchange among learners around the world. The transitions toward a more just, sustainable, and technologically equitable world will require investments to promote collaborative local-level leadership skills across all communities.

More expansive approaches to investing in young people can broaden forthcoming cohorts of leaders and help new forms of leadership emerge. Inspiring young people like Malala Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg have stepped up to call out previous generations' shortcomings and to inspire waves of new change agents around the world. Older generations have both celebrated the moral clarity of such voices while often gently chiding youth expectations as too ambitious. This paradox needs to be tackled head on, through concerted strategies to give young people greater say in their societies' futures and to help them learn more directly from generations with experience in power. It is time for legacy leaders to start transitioning responsibilities toward the cohorts who will define the coming frontiers of humanity.

For this, more explicit intergeneration alliances are required across all segments of society. Post-secondary institutions often serve as hubs of intergenerational collaboration and need to be tapped for such tasks. Such coalitions can also be fostered by sector, industry, geography, profession, and even gender, the latter including both female and male leaders rightly pushing for gender equality at all ages. In all industries and all sectors, the resources and insights of older and middle-aged people can mesh with the energy and ethical clarity of young people to build a new societal approach to sustainable development for all.

Actions for 2021

This year's 17 Rooms process identified a number of tactical action areas that could help advance these generational partnership efforts in 2021. These include:

- **Convening regional, sub-regional, and national forums on rebuilding education systems:** Finance and education ministers need to convene across jurisdictions, to share evidence and budgeting options for ensuring “catch-up” learning among children in and out of school. These dialogues could explore the helpful role of technology in potentially curbing learning loss, improving access to education, and boosting the quality of learning in affordable ways, particularly for disadvantaged students.
- **Promoting inter-university collaboration on learning tools for community stakeholders:** By collaborating to develop and expand learning opportunities for diverse stakeholders, post-secondary institutions can foster new approaches to community leadership. Integrating the concepts of sustainable development into all curricula through novel learning modules can also help foster awareness of the interdependency of seemingly intractable problems, while enhancing opportunities for creative solutions.
- **Launching an intergenerational leadership incubator:** An existing or new enterprise could proactively connect networks and organizations led by different age groups, starting with those focused on gender equality. The incubator could

eventually fan out across all dimensions of the SDGs to build communities of practice that advance intergenerational collaborations across the varied economic, social, and environmental domains of sustainable development.

- **Organizing community-level “17 Rooms-X” initiatives:** Several universities and community-based enterprises have already begun to experiment with the 17 Rooms methodologies, connecting individuals across generations and stakeholders to identify opportunities for near-term SDG action. In 2021, the 17 Rooms secretariat aims to support the expansion of these pilot efforts through toolkits and facilitation, to share insights and experiences in galvanizing bottom-up cooperation.

100.

**Doubling
down on
2021**

At the start of 2020, few people could have predicted how many pillars of daily life would be so quickly turned upside down. Nor do many want to return to what, in hindsight, we now know to be the fragility of 2019. The problems in the rearview mirror are all too obvious. The only possible direction of travel is forward.

Fortunately, some key ingredients for a better 2021 could be pending on the horizon. A vaccine against COVID-19 might become widely available. Rekindled international cooperation could make decisive inroads on major issues like climate change. The challenge will be to leverage the promising moments of refresh to drive transitions towards new norms and approaches. Success hinges on the world's collective efforts to confront common issues at full scale.

The leading definitions of success are still embedded in the SDGs. The coming year will be a time for redoubling efforts to achieve them. This year's 17 Rooms flagship process provides grounds for optimism that gains are possible. We hope readers draw inspiration from the Great Transitions to identify opportunities for action in their own communities. Everyone can contribute. The opportunity is a world of inclusion, resilience, and sustainability for all.

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17 Rooms—2020 Annual Flagship



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