

## Lockdown Dialogues 12 May 2020

### Lockdown changes the boundaries of freedom

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The *Lockdown Dialogues*, which examine citizens' experiences in Finland during the lockdown, continued in May. These dialogues offer citizens an opportunity for constructive dialogue in the midst of the coronavirus crisis while helping to form a comprehensive overview of the state of our society. More than 350 people with different backgrounds and life situations participated in the dialogues.

The participants were young people, adults and older people alike; students, workers, those who have been laid off or are unemployed, and pensioners; ordinary citizens, public officials and decision-makers. This time food producers, event organisers, education managers and experts by experience joined in as new groups. An increasing number of dialogues also involved people from around the world, including Croatia, Germany, Israel, Italy, Jordan, the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the United States.

In dialogues held on the same day around Finland, as key topics emerged the lifting of restrictions and its consequences, the new boundaries between people, humanity and freedom. People feel at the same time relieved and worried about the lifting of the restrictions. It leads them to reflect on the 'new normal' in which the physical and social boundaries between people have shifted.

This new life also includes new freedoms, which often are more limited. At the same time, the experience of shared humanity is strengthened as people imagine how the crisis affects the lives of individuals in different positions in Finland and around the world. From the perspective of national unity, participants ask if we are sailing towards an uncertain future in the same boat, or in the same storm but in different boats.

### People feel relieved and worried about the lifting of restrictions

*"What we thought of as normal and constant, a life where you do normal things, has taken a knock."* (1)

Feelings of relief and concern about the lifting of restrictions surfaced in the discussions. Many entrepreneurs and organisers of different services felt relieved about the relaxing of the restrictions, while they also wondered if people dare yet come and use the services. Many participants were particularly relieved about the fact that it is now easier for vulnerable people to access help and support. However, there is a great deal of concern and uncertainty: Is it safe to be out and about? Can I meet my friends now? Is it safe to go to school? How will entrance examinations be arranged?

While people talk about the 'new normal', they also wonder what it ultimately means. For some, the new normal is about inspiring new ways of working and encountering other people. For others it is characterised by a fear of the epidemic spreading as the restrictions are relaxed, or further hardship as economic uncertainty continues. The new normal may also mean a world in which the crisis has awakened people to notice what is important in life, to push themselves less hard and avoid activities that harm the environment.

*"This could bring us great wisdom to set a course for a different relationship with nature and to look at things with more appreciation than we have done up till now."* (2)

### **Boundaries between people are shifting**

*"After yesterday's meeting, I was left wondering if I had gone too close."* (3)

The lockdown results in shifting boundaries between people in both physical and online encounters. Even if you could meet people, it does not feel the same. You cannot go near other people or give them a hug. Safety distances and the different views people take of observing them cause confusion. What can and may you do in a given situation?

We have already practised online interaction at work, at school, in hobbies and between family and friends. Some participants feel that remote meetings at work make interaction more equal as we listen to each other better. We have also discovered what online encounters cannot get across: gestures, nuances of emotions and physical reciprocity. On the long run, remote interaction is also exhausting. People long for doing things physically together, being heard and seen. They also worry about the narrowing of their personal views:

*"I notice my horizons narrowing now that there are no discussions over coffee with other people."* (4)

### **Freedom is looking for new channels**

*"It's not our freedom that we have lost, most of us are still free. For example, we can go under those cherry trees and take pictures of each other."* (5)

The continued lockdown has prompted the participants to reflect on freedom, and restrictions of freedom. What does freedom mean to me and how is it realised? What do I have to give up and what do I get in return?

The crisis has made visible the fact that using your freedom is associated with responsibility for others. Many would like to be out and about, meet family members or take part in

volunteer work, but they are afraid of harming those in at-risk groups. We are constantly forced to consider our actions from several different perspectives.

Some of the participants feel that the freedom to be out and about, travel and meet people has almost completely disappeared from their lives. It is like being in prison or dragging a ball and chain with you. Especially for those living alone, having their freedom restricted can have drastic effects, as being closeted at home exacerbates loneliness. On the other hand, others feel that the lockdown has liberated them from continuously pushing themselves and meeting the expectations at work. They are now free to focus on what they find the most important.

### **Immersing yourself in other people's situations promotes fellow feeling**

*"We are ALL equally important and on the same starting line."* (6)

The crisis has led many of the participants to imagine what people in different positions and situations are experiencing in their lives. Many find themselves seeing things from a different viewpoint than usual, and weigh their personal concerns against those of others.

In work situations, the daily life that was previously private has a stronger presence than before. Private life is allowed to be visible, and in remote connections it can often do so in rather concrete terms. At many workplaces, people share very personal experiences, and increasing numbers have found the courage to also talk about difficult topics. For those in a supervisory position, however, this exacerbates their concerns over the employees' coping and their own ability to recognise problems and provide help.

As the world has changed, people are reaching out to each other by new means. This generates a new sense of communality. In particular, expatriate Finns who participated in the dialogue shared their experiences of communality in their home countries: people sing on balconies, and emergency vehicles sound their sirens in harmony.

### **Those carrying responsibility become exhausted**

*"The parents of young children are exhausted, and I'm not surprised."* (7)

As the state of emergency continues, those carrying responsibility find it tough. Parents taking care of their children are exhausted under the conflicting pressures of telework, virtual school, childcare and cooking. Several participants also expressed their concern over how health care personnel are coping, and the exhaustion of informal carers. Professional providers of assistance described how they support many of their clients who are in difficult life situations while wondering how they will cope themselves, or how their family and friends are doing. People are also concerned about the possibility that other illnesses of the body and mind remain untreated when the focus is on the coronavirus. What long-term multiplier effects will neglecting these issues have?

## **A test of national unity**

*"While the coronavirus separates us, it also brings us together more than ever."* (4)

The metaphor of being in the same boat comes up repeatedly in the dialogues: the coronavirus crisis brings people together as they face a common challenge. The situation is compared to wartime experiences when

*"What mattered was keeping as many people as possible alive and staying sane"* (Dialogue Academy 2).

Unlike during the last war, we today have enough food and effective digital connections. Even in the midst of the crisis, our ability to keep in touch cannot even be compared with the conditions in the past. Many participants believed that when the will is there, people are able to work for common goals.

It equally becomes clear that people in different life situations and social and economic positions face different challenges during the lockdown. After all, are we facing the same storm but in different boats?

## **Authorities are trusted but the media causes confusion**

The participants have confidence in the Finnish health care system, the authorities' activities and evidence-based decision-making. However, they would like more transparency concerning the background and justifications for decisions, and a wider group of experts should be consulted.

The media, on the other hand, is criticised for stimulating unnecessary fears and exacerbating confrontations. Some of the participants regulate the time they spend following the news, as the overload of coronavirus information makes them anxious. The fragmented information makes it difficult to create a big picture and understand which information is reliable. Many are worried about citizens' ability to access reliable information, rather just than clicking on the headlines that scream the loudest. Some are particularly upset about the tendentious confrontations created in the media, especially if they seem irrelevant to the reader's daily life.

*"Why must it always be us against them, the good and the bad?"* (8)

## **Dialogues bring peace and open up new horizons**

Many experience participating in the dialogue as a relief. It provides an opportunity to pause at this experience with others, without attempting to resolve anything at that precise moment. The participants find that the dialogues strengthen the ability of both individuals and communities to cope and look to the future.

*"The dialogue has brought us together and been an empowering experience."* (4)

### **Facts about the dialogues of 12 May**

– Number of dialogues: 43

– Number of participants: approx. 350

– Locations: Berlin (Germany), Brescia (Italy), California (USA), Croatia, Espoo, Gloucestershire (United Kingdom), Haifa (Israel), Hanko, Helsinki, Huittinen, Joensuu, Jordan, Jyväskylä, Kiev (Ukraine), Kirkkonummi, Kouvola, Kuopio, Lahti, Lappeenranta, Nokia, Porvoo, Rome (Italy), Rovaniemi, Siilinjärvi, Spain, St Petersburg (Russia), Suomensjärvi, Tammisaari, Tampere, Texas (USA), Trento (Italy), Turku, Utrecht (the Netherlands), Vantaa, Ähtäri.

– Dialogue organisers who submitted a synopsis (references to the quotations in brackets): Anna-Maija Hakuni-Luoma, Children of the Station (6), Crisis Management Initiative – CMI (5), the Cultura Foundation, Depolarize project & the Federation of Finnish Enterprises, Dialogue Academy Aretai Oy (3), Eeva Nummi and Anita Nikkanen, Finnish Pensioners' Federation (2), the Central Association of Finnish Pensioners, the Timeout Foundation, the Timeout Foundation & Inno Ok, the Timeout Foundation & Plan Finland, the City of Espoo, the Deaconess Foundation, Helsinki Cathedral Parish, the University of Eastern Finland/Aducate, the City of Jyväskylä, citizens Katja, Timo & Ilona, the Advisory Board on Civil Society Policy KANE, Kaskas Media, the National Church Council/the church's work with expatriate Finns, the Church Resources Agency & Oulu Deaconess Institute ODL/Ikäarvokas project, City of Lahti (4), Laurea University of Applied Sciences, the Association for Rural Culture and Education (8), Malmi Parish, Mari Tähjä, MDI Oy, Naistenkartano (7), Sivis Study Centre, Pro-Tukipiste association, Tiina and Antti Herlin Foundation, the Union of Private Sector Professionals ERTO (1), the Ministry of Finance.