

## **Lockdown Dialogues 16 April 2020**

### **Finnish people talked about the impacts of lockdown**

Worry about themselves and others, strengthening of communality, blaming and feeling guilty, astonishment and joy over the digital leap, acknowledgement of social inequality and reflections on an uncertain future.

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Worry about themselves and others, strengthening of communality, blaming and feeling guilty, astonishment and joy over the digital leap, acknowledgement of social inequality and reflections on an uncertain future. These issues were topmost on people's minds in the first *Lockdown Dialogues* organised around Finland on the same day.

More than 200 people took part in the dialogues. The group of participants was highly diverse: parents of young children, teachers, young people, pensioners, NGO activists, prisoners on parole, immigrants, managers, entrepreneurs, freelancers, cultural sector professionals, researchers, central and local government office holders. Life in Finland during the lockdown was thus examined from the viewpoints of a variety of individuals and communities, producing an overview of the new state of our society.

What became evident in the dialogues is that – even though each individual is experiencing the crisis and the lockdown in their own way – almost everyone has similar anxieties and things that make them feel safe. On the one hand, the importance of loved ones, home, work and school is emphasised during the crisis. On the other hand, participants' worries extended beyond their immediate surroundings: to the vulnerable in Finnish society and those suffering in other countries. The crisis seems to have brought to the surface both a new awareness of privilege and a willingness to help those who are less fortunate. However, it is not always easy to find channels for assisting others that suit you in this situation.

The crisis brought on by the coronavirus has obscured any clear view of the future for individuals and communities. The participants reflected on how their lives, Finland and the world will change as a result of the crisis. They found that we have reached a turning point. There is no going back to the same old life. The fundamental vulnerability of society has been exposed, and the crisis may lead to many new difficulties. But there is also hope that something good may come out of all this.

## **The crisis forces you to take stock**

*"People are forced to take stock of basic things, and this makes many think about what is really important in life." (1)*

The rapidly spreading global coronavirus epidemic and the restrictions imposed in Finland, too, have shut a large proportion of citizens into their homes and transformed everyday life. Dialogue participants described how the lockdown has guided them back to basic things and fundamental values. Loved ones, home, health, food, neighbours, school, work and connecting with nature have taken on a new value in the threatening situation. Many participants thus said that things they took for granted in the past suddenly seemed more valuable and rewarding than before the crisis.

## **Concerns over yourself and others**

*"During the first two weeks, I was not sure what I was concerned about: myself, my loved ones or the world?" (2)*

For most participants, life in the midst of the crisis was steeped with anxiety. Many said they were concerned about some people in their immediate circles. There were a number of concerns: the health of loved ones, difficulties in contacting them, financial distress and unemployment, the health of grandparents, children's schooling and plans for young people's future.

*"I'm not scared for myself, but my grandparents are alive and belong to an at-risk group. I'm a bit anxious about them." (3)*

The anxiety also extended further than the participants' immediate circles. Concerns over other people in Finland and abroad were raised in almost every dialogue. Can at-risk groups be protected? Does the healthcare system have enough capacity? How are lonely people coping? How can people struggling with mental health problems get help? Do immigrants living in Finland receive adequate help and can we get the correct information across to them? What happens to those in refugee camps?

Many were also concerned about how they would cope themselves. Some worried about the possibility of becoming ill, while others were concerned over their own psychological coping or were mostly anxious about their personal financial situation. The lockdown places a particular strain on parents of young children, as work and parenting must be combined in a new way. A number of parents were worried about their own tiredness. How will this affect families and intimate relationships? At some point, will something just snap? If you cannot take it anymore, who will look after the children?

### **Communality is strengthened but will some people be left out?**

*"You cannot just think of yourself – I need other people, and some of the others need me."*

(4)

Participants in the Lockdown Dialogues reported having observed how people's natural tendency to take care of each other has been emphasised in the crisis. Communality has emerged, gathered strength and found new forms. Helping neighbours, food aid, collegiality while teleworking, spending evenings together via remote connections, and many other forms of togetherness have sprung up out of nowhere. The threshold for asking other people how they are and how they are doing is low.

Concerns were also expressed about those who may be excluded from communities. Lonely older people, children who miss their friends, and mental health rehabilitees living alone sparked concern. Participants also wonder how long communality will last if the crisis continues for a long time. Some said they had already noticed it dwindling and starting to crack. If the situation becomes worse, will we start looking to our own interests and defending our territory?

### **While inequalities have become visible, a willingness to help has also emerged**

*"Although I know about the diversity and inequality of families, the comment about lack of a good home really touched me, gave me pause and helped me put things in perspective."* (5)

In every dialogue, people's inequalities during and after the crisis were dealt with one way or another. Participants found that the crisis has clearly highlighted the inequalities prevailing in Finnish society. They were also worried that the crisis might increase these inequalities. Inequality was seen in many different contexts: occupations, places of residence, life situations, knowledge and skills.

In all dialogues, participants identified groups of people and individuals who they thought were worse off than themselves. Older people, families who already faced difficulties before the crisis, the long-term unemployed, disadvantaged young people, immigrants and mental health rehabilitees were in the thoughts of many participants.

Many expressed their willingness to help those in a more vulnerable position in this situation. They felt a need to help and do good to others. However, suitable channels for providing help cannot always be found. Some also worried that helping others could exhaust them and deprive them of their last few remaining resources.

## **The digital leap brings joy and gives rise to reflection**

*"It has forced us to take a digital leap. This was the time when we had to do it."* (6)

Now at the very latest – prompted by the crisis – Finnish people have taken a digital leap. Work and school are managed using remote connections. In many workplaces, even those employees who have so far taken a dim view of digital technology have had to learn to use it. Employers have also seen that telework can actually go smoothly. The digital leap is a cause for excitement and pride. We can do this, we can keep society running also through remote connections.

However, many people pointed out that the digital leap is also associated with inequalities. Not everyone can switch to teleworking from home. There are also many people who do not have the necessary devices and skills, which puts people in an unequal position. This can be seen in the world of work, virtual school and older people's daily lives alike. Many also find the sudden increase in device and remote connection use exhausting, while others feel that computers can sometimes come in between genuine human encounters.

The participants did not believe that where digitalisation is concerned, we would go back to the way things were. Telework and remote meetings are here to stay. This is why digital skills must be improved further, and we will continue to need good shared digital platforms to ensure that the digital leap does not lead to the permanent exclusion of anyone.

## **The new normal – calmer but more limited and oppressive**

*"I don't know what is going to happen next week, but we always manage somehow."* (7)

Living on the terms of the crisis has quickly become the new normal. New practices have been learned, both in private life and at work. Many have been surprised by how easy it has been to give up some things that they previously found very important: travel, hobbies, personal freedom and routines. They have been replaced by new routines, the small pleasures of a restricted life, and being happy with what you have.

Many seem to have gained more time, and the state of emergency has created new possibilities in daily life. If none of your loved ones are sick, you can calm down and be kind to yourself. When you work at home, you can have interesting discussions with the children about your work, your wishes and life in general. You can also be happy with life in isolation.

Anxiety and mood swings are part of the new normal. The worry is that the emphasis on 'social isolation' can lead people down the wrong track at a time when it is necessary to keep a physical distance but stay socially close to others. Sometimes life seems unreal when everything around you appears normal but a crisis that afflicts the entire world is on the news day after day. What feels particularly difficult is not knowing when the state of emergency will end.

You cannot plan for future properly: *“Your dreams are on hold.”* (8)

The new, more restricted and minimalist life has also made many people question the entire prevailing way of life. Several participants said they were thinking about the unsustainability of the continuous consumption associated with the current lifestyle. Could everyday life consist of what is really important? For them, talk about ‘going back to the way things were’ can be irritating.

### **Blaming and feeling guilty**

*“I’m a bad mother because I have to work and I can’t be with the kids even though they are around. A bad employee – a bad Mom, I cannot win either way. My feelings of inadequacy are overwhelming.”* (9)

The conditions during the lockdown are characterised by restrictions and rules. Dialogue participants spoke about situations where people police each other and get cross with others for breaking the rules. Many described how difficult it was to take the new rules seriously at first. Some also admitted to having violated some of the restrictions. The usual consequences of this is blaming on the part of others, and often also feelings of guilt. The new situation is confusing for almost everyone, and sometimes it is difficult to accept other people’s different ways of acting and reacting.

Life in the midst of the crisis also tests your abilities and makes you question the demands you set for yourself. The challenges faced by some professional groups in their work – such as teachers – have mounted enormously. While their working days have become unreasonably long, they still are unable to achieve the goals set for them. Parents feel they have no tools for encountering their children’s anxiety and coping with their own feelings of inadequacy when they are unable to give the children enough attention while working remotely. Others, on the other hand, are weighed down by guilt because their life is too easy in the midst of the crisis.

### **What happens when the restrictions start being lifted?**

*“Some believe we are getting over it. Others are convinced that the crisis is getting worse and worse.”* (10)

The lifting of restrictions can be glimpsed somewhere in a near future. People look forward to that time with great expectations but also great concerns. In general, people trust the authorities and experts in this respect, but they worry about the near future. If restrictions are lifted, will a new wave of the virus immediately follow? Will people be able to comply with the new, less stringent restrictions properly? If we have to stay isolated indoors even in the summer, will people be able to cope mentally? What if this will not be over for a long time?

## How will the crisis change Finland and the world?

*"I worry about international relations. Sensible, well-educated people are beginning to believe that democratic states are not crisis resilient."* (11)

Participants in the Lockdown Dialogues believed that the coronavirus crisis will change Finland and the world as a whole in some way. What will these changes be like? At this point, the future appears very uncertain, and the direction it will take can only be guessed.

There were major differences between the participants regarding whether they see the future as threatening or positive. The lockdown has brought about very large and highly diverse changes in people's lives, at least on a temporary basis, both in terms of work and leisure time. Only time will tell which changes remain permanent. The crisis will also trigger new chains of events in the economy, politics and, in broader terms, entire society. These impacts are equally impossible to foresee.

Participants in several dialogues noted that the future seems better for Finland than for many other parts of the world. The virus has not spread uncontrollably. The information and instructions issued by the authorities have mainly worked well. Participants also welcomed the fact that Finland has held on to parliamentary decision-making even in the middle of the crisis. Worried and critical voices referred to the massive economic difficulties that loom in a near future: bankruptcies of companies, unemployment, and the effects of a new recession on vulnerable people, especially children and young people.

Views of the global future were generally more pessimistic than those concerning Finland. The participants mentioned that even before the coronavirus crisis, there already were enormous problems in the world: climate change, overconsumption, great power politics coming to ahead, poverty and inequality. They have not gone away, even if the crisis has overshadowed them for a while. What will happen when the economy collapses to some extent? If countries are already arguing with each other about face mask procurements, what will happen if the situation gets worse? Will people put their faith in authoritarian governments or democracies when it comes to the ability to resolve crises?

Many participants expressed the opinion that the world after the pandemic will also be up to us. Crises are known to be turning points, and everyone can try and make a difference regarding the direction we will turn to. The world now has an opportunity to make a positive change, even a major one, but this will require a shared will and vision.

## We can learn from difficulties

*"Civic actors and NGOs could highlight the positive aspects of this situation and what we could learn from it, so that we could avoid going back to the way things were."* (12)

The participants found that they had already learned a lot from the crisis. They said the situation has given them pause, and they have thought about their lives and the world in a

new way. The priorities of values have become clearer, and you now know exactly where you stand in society. A lot of creativity has been released in a short period, as it has been necessary to learn many new things: a different way of managing daily life, digital skills, skills in maintaining your peace of mind, gratitude for small things and alternative ways of caring for other people.

Some people wondered if anything will, after all, be learned from this change at the level of entire society. Do we genuinely wish to investigate and put to rights the things that led to this crisis? Will we be any better prepared to face new crises and difficulties in the future?

### **Dialogue creates hope**

*"The dialogue has created an understanding of, or an insight into, communality and shared concerns, feelings and will."* (13)

The opportunity to come together and have a dialogue about life in lockdown was praised in each dialogue. A dialogue was a new experience for many as such, and having a dialogue using remote connections was new for almost everyone. Many noted that such dialogues were hugely important. Participants reported that the dialogue relieved their worries, helped them understand themselves and others better, and restored their faith in future.

*"The dialogue created an incredible feeling of trust. If I had to choose three important concepts to describe it in plain Finnish, I would pick peer support, feeling connected, and therapeutic effects."* (14)

In several dialogues, the participants wondered how a trusting and profound relationship can be established in a short period of time between people who do not know each other. In a time of crisis, dialogue was seen to play an even greater role than before in holding communities together and building trust. Numerous participants also said they had picked up good insights from others in the dialogue and tried out new practices and different attitudes in their daily lives inspired by it.

The exclamation of one of the participants at the end of the dialogues sums up the feelings of many: *"Dialogue is important, it must be continued and expanded!"* (15)

### **Facts about the dialogues**

- Number of dialogues: 27
- Number of participants: approx. 200
- Locations: Espoo, Helsinki, Joensuu, Kotka, Kouvola, Lahti, Lappeenranta, Porvoo, Rovaniemi, Salo, Seinäjoki, Tampere, Turku, Vantaa. In addition: France, Italy and the United Kingdom

- Discussion organisers who submitted a synopsis (references to the quotations in parentheses):  
The Museum of Finnish Architecture (6), Crisis Management Initiative - CMI (1), the Cultura Foundation (14), Dialogue Academy Aretai Oy (3, 15), Eeva Nummi & Anita Nikkanen (10), Finnish Pensioners' Federation (13), Timeout Foundation (7), the City of Espoo, Fingo (4), the Deaconess Foundation, the University of Eastern Finland, Kalliola Settlement (4), the City of Lahti (5, 9), the Regional Council of Lapland, Mari Tähjä & Jani Turku, Nicehearts, Sivis Study Centre, the Union of Private Sector Professionals ERTO, the Ministry of Finance (11), Active Citizens in Society – YAK (2).