

Lockdown Dialogues 22 October 2020

Prolonged pandemic puts confidence and faith in the future to the test

The second Lockdown Dialogues event of the autumn focused on discussing and building confidence and faith in the future. Participating in the discussions, held in both Finnish and Swedish, were people from across the country: young people, pensioners, health and social care professionals, supervisors and managers, parishioners, employees of city authorities, trade union members, entrepreneurs and public officials.

The subjects discussed included the following: the long-term impact of remote working; learning together; the effects of a prolonged pandemic on social ties and communities; and people's trust and confidence in each other and in institutions.

Although trust and confidence are being put to the test right now, the dialogue participants were also hopeful. Sharing hopes and concerns through discussion gave participants the opportunity to stop for a moment and to think and engage with others. The dialogue between gloom and hope points to a challenging time ahead, where we will need new visions for the future.

Still a lot to learn about remote working

“After a day on Teams I’m completely done in. You can now have a situation where there isn’t even a toilet break between meetings. But we just push ahead and get things done.”

(1)

Many discussions involved sharing experiences of remote working. More and more people are now working from home again, and the mood is split.

Some people enjoy working at home – they prefer it to going into work, and feel it's a more efficient way of working. Others find it unpleasant, lonely and discouraging.

Many felt that remote working has both good and bad points in equal measure. It requires a different separation of work and free time, and a different approach to the daily routine, breaks, sitting positions and workplace practices. Together we must find ways to maximise the advantages and minimise the disadvantages.

The long-term effects of remote working are gradually beginning to emerge. The participants felt that during the COVID-19 crisis, management and supervisors have taken a more positive stance towards remote working.

Employees are not lounging around at home but are sometimes in fact doing overly long days. Remote working seems to overload the work of supervisors particularly much, as they are now always contactable and end up having to resolve many new kinds of work challenges experienced by employees.

Some participants felt that with remote working it is difficult to know what exactly your colleagues are doing and how they are really coping at this difficult time.

The hybrid approach taken in many workplaces, where some workers are at home and others at the workplace, has been hard for some to understand.

Why are some employees allowed to work from home while others have to go to the workplace? What are those at home missing out on, when those in the workplace can enjoy the advantages of being with colleagues?

Social ties being reshaped – and some are breaking

“Most worrying of all are the children and young people who are not accounted for, who can’t be reached.” (2)

The Lockdown Dialogues included a lot of discussion from different angles about how communities and groups of people can function and stay together in a prolonged pandemic. The spread of remote connections can make it easier to participate and brings people closer who are geographically distant from one another.

The flip side of remote connections is that communicating by microphone means we are not engaging fully with each other. Many in fact felt that their social circles had shrunk. In these times it’s not easy to strike up new acquaintances.

Some people also reported a radical change in their own social situation. When you can no longer meet others in the same way and be in contact with family members, you start to think about your place in the world and in the different communities in your life.

Being in isolation for more than six months is a long time, especially for many older people who are in the later stages of their lives. When you only have a few years left, you start to think about what you can still do and what you can’t.

In the spring Lockdown Dialogues there was a general concern about caring for the more vulnerable in society. The tone of concerns has now changed: people are aware that not everyone is managing, but there is less talk of helping others.

The health and social care professionals taking part in the discussions reported that there has been an increase in loneliness and distress. Over remote connections, though, it is difficult to reach and engage with everyone who needs assistance.

Many of those who require help have completely fallen through the safety net maintained by public services and civil society organisations. There are also children who have not been contactable since the spring. This raises concern about where these people are. Has our social safety net really failed in regard to these individuals?

Trust and confidence being put to the test and being built up

“When people have faith in each other in society, this also feeds through to confidence in society’s institutions.” (3)

The pandemic is putting people’s trust and confidence to the test – in regard to each other and to the institutions of society. The extent of this trust and confidence was discussed in various contexts: at work and in free time; in remote and physical meetings; in the actions of authorities and decision-makers; and in regard to information provided to citizens from different sources.

In general, it was felt that there is a strong climate of trust in Finland, where people have confidence in decision-makers, and decision-makers have confidence in citizens. Participants noted that trust in decisions and recommendations is supported by the fact that the background to these is transparent and the reasoning is based on knowledge. At the same time, some were wondering whether in Finland we had been following the restrictive measures too dutifully and whether we were blind to the human rights impact of the measures.

Erroneous information can also be found, and some participants were worried that people see and hear only what they choose to within their bubble. Not everyone trusts the ability of their fellow citizens to protect themselves and others around them from contracting the virus, as people have different views on the necessity of mask wearing, for instance.

It was also noted how, in working life, a new kind of trust is being created within managerial and team work as a result of remote working. Those in management positions describe the shift from the world of timecards to remote working as an attitude shift towards building more trust.

In remote working, though, there are still problems with getting information out there. Communication and interaction that help build trust and confidence demand both time and attention.

Must learn to live with a gloomier view of the future

“Everyone is trying to be flexible, to adapt and be helpful in the current situation. We’re definitely getting through this.” (4)

People have not begun to despair, although few participants expressed strong confidence in the future. There was concern about how to cope through the winter, whether the coronavirus vaccine will be safe, whether travel will again be possible one day, and whether new pandemics will arrive in the future.

Many discussions looked at what could help us move forward and what could boost our faith in the future. Entrepreneurs and self-employed people in particular reported being accustomed to change and to unforeseen situations. It’s good to take things calmly and try to solve them one at a time.

Confidence was expressed in the resilience of Finns, and there was faith that decision-makers and public officials will be able to take the country forward even in difficult situations.

In the spring dialogues there was a belief that after COVID-19 the world could be a kinder, fairer and ecologically more sustainable place. Now, in the autumn and with the prolonging of the pandemic, there is less talk of this.

In place of the grand visions are more focused hopes: sorting out one's own life, questioning performance-based lifestyles, supporting digital practices that work well, strengthening local communities and village schools, and appreciation of Finnish products.

Dialogues give feeling of involvement and engagement

"Thanks, we haven't really spoken about this before – that helps, definitely." (5)

Many of the discussions called for a strengthening of communities and community spirit, as had been experienced during the lockdown, and for developing new ways of doing things together.

One such way of building a community spirit is through dialogue, where people stop to think and engage with others. Even discussions that involved quite gloomy views often ended with the participants feeling that it had helped and had enabled them to be more hopeful. How can we create more of these moments?

Facts about the Lockdown Dialogues

- Number of dialogues: 12
- Number of participants 87
- Locations: Spain, Espoo, Helsinki, Joensuu, Kuopio, Lahti, Laukaa, Tammisaari, Tampere.
- Discussion organisers who submitted a synopsis (references to the quotations in brackets): Community Power / Tuovi Leppänen (5), Dialogue Academy/Aretai Oy, Timeout Foundation (3 dialogues), Helsinki Cathedral Parish/Hope Dialogues, University of Eastern Finland, City of Lahti (1), Pesäpuu - Centre of Expertise in Child Welfare (2), UN Youth of Finland (3), Union of Private Sector Professionals ERTO, Ministry of Finance (4).