

Lockdown Dialogues 23 September 2020

The Lockdown Dialogues in the spring began by focusing on society's sudden grind to a halt at the early stage of the crisis, then turned to the waiting phase with its uncertainties, and, with summer arriving, concentrated on the relief brought about by the lifting of restrictions. In the autumn now, the pandemic is escalating again and it was clear in the discussions that people are suffering fatigue, they are constantly on their guard, feeling uncertain and insecure, and concerned that not everybody appears to be pulling in the same direction as much as before.

The chance to stop and discuss things for a while helped participants to structure their concerns and wishes. Talking with others and sharing experiences gave people renewed strength and confidence in the future. The participants also realised that there have been successes in many areas and that lessons have been learned, too.

Discussions focused on uncertainties in everyday life

The *Lockdown Dialogues* events which were begun in the spring, attracting more than 1,100 participants, have continued in the autumn, as individuals, groups and organisations gathered to discuss life in these exceptional times.

In the spring, the Lockdown Dialogues began by focusing on society's sudden grind to a halt at the early stage of the crisis, then turned to the waiting phase with its uncertainties, and, with summer arriving, concentrated on the relief brought about by the lifting of restrictions. During the summer, the restrictions were fewer and people got together more and spent their holidays in Finland.

The pandemic is now escalating again, and in the discussions it was clear that people are suffering fatigue, they are constantly on their guard, feeling uncertain and insecure, and concerned that not everybody appears to be pulling in the same direction. Only faint glimmers were still visible of the beacons of hope seen in the spring discussions, in which there had been talk of caring and community, of a rediscovered relationship with nature, and of a more forgiving attitude to oneself and to others.

Participating in the first of the autumn's Lockdown Dialogues were people of different ages from around Finland and abroad: young opinion-shapers and influencers, employees of city authorities and central government, Finns living abroad, members of parishes, residents of housing company properties, experts, managers and entrepreneurs.

The discussions, in Finnish and in Swedish, provided an opportunity to talk about feelings that people have regarding the uncertainties in everyday life. Talking to others and sharing experiences in this way gave renewed strength to participants, and a greater confidence in the future. The chance to stop and discuss things for a while helped participants to structure their concerns and wishes, and to look ahead. Together the participants realised that there have been successes in many areas and that lessons have been learned, too.

Uncertainty weighs on the mind

“The question of whether we’ll be hit by a quarantine tomorrow is something I’m constantly thinking about.” (1)

After a summer in which the virus situation was much improved, the autumn has been characterised by constant vigilance. Feelings of insecurity emerged as participants talked about what’s next, and whether schools will stay open and how much longer they themselves can keep going like this. Floating along, a sense of paralysis, scraping by, and constant braking – these are all descriptions used by participants to explain their situation.

Uncertainty about the future causes frustration and everyday uncertainty wears you out, mentally and physically. Many have spent so much time caring for others that they have forgotten to look after themselves and their own wellbeing. Some people missed hugging, too.

Many were sad that dreams and hopes are having to be postponed to some unspecified time in the future. It is important, though, to hang on to these, as this situation, too, will be over one day. Spending time at a cabin or cottage away from home, meeting people important to you, and sharing thoughts and ideas are all things that can help to keep us going as we wait for the pandemic to subside.

Spirit of solidarity faded

“There was a strong feeling of togetherness, of solidarity, at the start of the virus crisis, but that’s gradually faded.” (2)

In the spring, when the epidemic started, the Lockdown Dialogue participants felt that there was a strong spirit of solidarity: we will get through this, together! However, there was now the feeling that this sense of pulling together has faded along the way. Whereas people had earlier experienced the feeling of solidarity as a country or in their own local area or workplace, the feeling is that now it has diminished and fragmented into ever smaller circles. Concern was also expressed about racism in the debate and about conspiracy theories.

The low level of mask usage emerged as an example of lack of a spirit of solidarity. Despite the recommendation, masks were felt to be rarely used in public transport and premises. For some participants, the use of a mask went without saying, while for others it was a bother, and some felt their conscience pricked when out and about without the mask. There are also areas and situations where it was felt socially more acceptable not to use a mask. In this respect, a clearer approach was felt to be needed to the recommendations of the authorities, which were seen to be lukewarm and vague.

People becoming less and more equal

“Many of the impacts will only be visible or start to occur many years from now.” (2)

The discussion begun in the spring on the impact of the epidemic on people in different walks of life and in different life situations is continuing in the autumn, too. In education, some pupils suffered from having inadequate resources at home to deal with distance learning, or from lack of support or absence of school meals. Those completing degrees or other studies in the spring have had difficulty finding work. With many planned exchange studies and work placements abroad being cancelled, it was feared that there could be far-reaching effects on future job opportunities. In working life, there are many occupational groups with a risk of exposure to coronavirus, and, in turn, a risk of exposing family members. Many sectors and business operators are struggling to survive.

At the same time, the huge leap worldwide in the use and development of digital technologies could also be creating greater equality and bring people closer together. There is a feeling that, for example, regional equality has improved as a result of new remote practices.

Some participants were even thinking about new solutions for organising everyday life and living arrangements. It was noted that there is a completely new kind of readiness to work from home, and that people have already learned to switch without difficulty from the workplace to working at home as necessary. We have also learned what kind of things can and cannot be done and managed remotely.

However, remote working is not without its problems, and it also divides people in a new way. Some people have the chance to work remotely, and others don't. Some can freely choose remote work, while others are forced to do it. The discussions also noted that managers and supervisors should take into account that people have different support needs in remote work and in hybrid work. Problems of poorly organised work and unclear roles and structures are now more easily visible.

Dialogues bring renewed strength to cope and confidence in the future

“When I meet other people, it’s like a plant being given water.” (3)

Living a more isolated life means that meeting both familiar and unfamiliar faces is something people appreciate greatly. Many also find participation in the discussions to be rewarding as a way of reducing loneliness and bringing a breath of fresh air into an otherwise dull routine. It was also felt that the discussions bring renewed strength to cope and develop confidence in the future – that perhaps things will work out after all.

Many of the participants hoped that they could continue discussions with the people they had encountered in the Lockdown Dialogues. Participants felt it was important to take time to discuss today's challenges, to understand others' experiences and to hear about the ups and downs of others. People also appreciated that the discussions were being documented, as this will help in the future to understand what kind of issues people were wrestling with during the pandemic.

In exceptional times, everyday life and work can too easily be reduced to putting out fires: sorting out problems one after another, and quickly. But in workplace and other communities there is a strong need to find time and space for discussion. Kindness and empathy are needed for all kinds of encounters, online and face to face. Perhaps the answer to the fading level of solidarity lies in the very community-focused nature of engaging with others witnessed in the Lockdown Dialogues.

Facts about the 23 September Lockdown Dialogues

- Number of discussions: 10
- Number of participants: 76
- Locations: Helsinki, Lahti, Oulu region, Turku, France
- Discussion organisers who submitted a synopsis (references to the quotations in brackets): Timeout Foundation (four discussions), Helsinki Deaconess Institute, Helsinki Cathedral Parish/Hope Dialogues (3), City of Lahti (1), Maija Vähämäki/Turku School of Economics, UN Youth of Finland (2), Ministry of Finance.