

Lockdown Dialogues 28 April

Lockdown Dialogues continued and understanding was advanced

The exhausting nature of the lockdown, longing for physical closeness, development of resilience, cracks in communality, and building a more sustainable society got the participants from around Finland talking.

Life in a locked down world has put everything on hold

The *Lockdown Dialogues* helped build an understanding of what it is like to live in Finland during the lockdown. The exhausting nature of the lockdown, longing for physical closeness, development of resilience, cracks in communality, and building a more sustainable society got the participants talking in dialogues organised on the same day around Finland.

More than 250 people participated in the dialogues: young people, parents and grandparents, entrepreneurs, students, pensioners, central and local government employees, cultural sector professionals, researchers and NGO representatives. Groups of people whose voices are not always heard in societal discussions also took part in the Lockdown Dialogues. They included immigrant women, substance addiction rehabilitees, sex workers and family members of mental health rehabilitees. As the state of emergency continues, the overview of Finnish people's lives is characterised by a prolonged waiting, which gives rise to both concerns over an uncertain future and reflections on societal reform.

People in different life situations have different worries and expectations during the lockdown, but what they have in common is oscillating between worry and hope. While the lockdown is exhausting and people are weighed down by responsibility for the well-being of loved ones, society keeps going, and the resilience of individuals and communities is improving. The practices of working, studying and communicating people have been forced to adopt present them with challenges but also create new types of possibilities. Whereas people would like their lives to be safe and more predictable and they wish daily life would go back to normal, they are sketching a more sustainable future for Finnish society and the entire world.

The state of emergency is exhausting

“How long can we keep doing this for? For how long can we take this pressure?” (1)

At this point, it has become clear for the participants that the state of emergency will be a marathon rather than a sprint. Their moods swing from curiosity to exhaustion, fear to gratitude, and apathy to keeping busy.

There is great uncertainty about the future, as no one can predict how long the state of emergency will go on for. Uncertainty causes many fears to surface and sparks concerns over your own and other people's psychological resilience.

The participants are weighed down by responsibility for their and their loved ones' safety. Many are forced to make decisions that may have serious consequences. Can my child, who belongs to an at-risk group, go to school? Can I meet my parent who is suffering from loneliness? People working in a job where they are exposed to risks are frightened. They continuously have to weigh the infection risk from the viewpoint of the clients, themselves and their loved ones alike.

Fear of the infection causes people to monitor their own and other people's behaviour, continuously scanning safe distances and 'policing' others. This feels oppressive, and people miss the time when you could go out or shopping without worrying about somebody coming too close.

Longing for physical closeness

"What I find the most difficult is that you cannot touch and hug anyone." (2)

The participants longed for physical touch and being close to other people. Something essential is missing from your life when you cannot hug and hold people close to you, your grandchildren, parents or grandparents. Some may have been at home alone for weeks without touching another person. It is particularly hard to think about older people whose only human contact is an assistant performing care procedures in protective clothing.

At the same time, many families feel they are closer than ever before. They have time to stop and stay at home with the other members of the family. People find that giving and receiving affection has a major impact on their well-being.

During the lockdown, touching takes on new meanings: it can be a look or an experience of togetherness while out for a walk, across a safe distance.

"When there are fewer people about, they smile at each other." (4)

Society keeps going and individuals' resilience is improving

The participants said that for many people, the beginning of the state of emergency was like falling into a hole. For entrepreneurs, the initial shock was particularly severe: they had to cancel jobs that had been arranged, and concerns over the company's survival hit them while an unclear support policy exacerbated their distress.

Now people are gradually crawling out of this hole. They have realised that the essential wheels of society keep turning. People trust the authorities and experts, as the restrictions have produced the desired results. They are also beginning to find effective solutions in their daily lives, and many companies and workplaces have quickly started developing new ways of operating in the new situation.

"I have not thrown the towel in yet. I must plan for the future, I am still confident." (3)

Some participants welcome the opportunity to pause which the crisis has created. They have time to hang out with their families and think about what is important for them. Resources for coping can be found in everyday routines, watching the progress of spring in nature, faith, and people's inventiveness and sense of humour.

For some participants, life has changed little. They even feel relieved because enjoying their own company is now acceptable, and they do not have to force themselves to be active or interact too much. Some even feel guilty about having a peaceful work environment and secure livelihood when so many others are doing worse.

Communality is tested and starts cracking under pressure

"The only danger that threatens you is another person. This is shocking, but you must be able to live with it." (4)

The participants wanted to talk about how the continuing state of emergency affects different communities and communality. People wish to share their experiences and help others, and this strengthens communality in daily life. The shared will to survive connects people, and they keep in touch with family and friends more than ever. Concrete offers of assistance with service use and shopping are welcomed. The participants wondered if such willingness to help has always existed or if it emerges especially at times of crisis.

However, people question the impacts on communality caused by a lack of physical meetings at schools, workplaces and hobbies. Many NGOs, in particular, are concerned over keeping people active and ensuring that at-risk groups and older people can join in. Some participants reported that people are more inclined to be cross and aggressive when encountering each other. Will communality break down as individuals' psychological resilience fails?

Mounting concerns over the most vulnerable

"I am worried about children's and young people's situation. How will this affect their lives over the long term, and what will be needed in the future?" (5)

Growing concerns emerged in the discussions over the survival of people who are presumed to be in a vulnerable position to begin with. Homeless people who have nowhere to go queue for food parcels. And what is happening to lonely older people, or children and young people in need of support who cannot be contacted by schools and day care centres? Are there those among us whose distress goes unseen by anyone?

However, many of the participants have no direct contact with the groups of people they are concerned about. The participants included a number of professionals in education, social services and NGOs who meet people in a vulnerable position in their work also during the crisis. The lockdown conditions have to some extent made their work more difficult,

too. In assistance provision, remote connections are a poor substitute for face-to-face meetings. Not everyone can be reached with digital tools, and even when such tools are used, it is not always possible to find out how the client is actually doing.

Having difficulties in your life is not always exclusively a negative thing. For some people, difficulties and losses experienced in the past are a resource that helps them cope with the current crisis. Some participants with an immigrant background said it was a relief to know that they were safe and protected in Finland, compared to the war zones of their former home countries. Those who have survived other crises may also have something to give to others.

"When you have faced challenges in your life before, you have a survival kit which you can now go to and dig out the methods you learned in the past." (6)

The strengths and challenges of remote work are uncovered

Transferring work and study to online environments has required learning new skills, guidance and close communication. This has had two kinds of consequences. Introducing telework – where this has been possible – has given more time and space to concentrate on their work to some, whereas others are faced with a more hectic daily life. While virtual school is stressful for many families, some pupils in need of special support have done better in distance learning than in contact teaching.

Many feel they have more uninterrupted working time at their disposal, as they can control their contacts. Not having to commute, cancellation of meetings, and the general slowing down of pace in society reduce work-related stress. There is more time for thinking, and when your ability to concentrate improves, you can tackle such activities as reading books.

Participants working as supervisors found that a change in communication modes does not eliminate the need to encounter and support the employees. However, it is difficult to get a clear idea of the quality of work and personnel well-being when you rely on remote connections. There are also more misunderstandings, and skeletons tend to be pushed into cupboards when the crisis steals everyone's attention and communication takes place through devices.

Many participants hope that telework could become a routine and play some role in their daily lives also after the crisis. Practices and tools need to be developed, however, in order to put teleworking on a permanent footing. Especially NGO actors call for easy-to-use tools which work in Finnish to make the benefits of remote connections available to all.

"My ability to concentrate has improved, and I have started reading books. I cannot remember the last time this happened!" (7)

The crisis creates threats but also opportunities

Most participants are hopeful about returning to normal daily life. However, the crisis has made them think about what values are important both in their lives and society. The state of emergency is seen as a possible turning point towards a world which is more ecologically sustainable and socially equal, and in which new and more sustainable ways of working, spending time, consuming and holidaying come up. Travel, for example, may not feel acceptable in the same way even if the restrictions were lifted.

While the participants visualised the possibilities of building a new welfare society, they were concerned over the exacerbating social inequalities during the state of emergency. Could work be divided, allowing welfare to grow more evenly? What types of new and more sustainable products, services and operating models will the crisis generate? How can people's creativity be maintained in a challenging and stressful situation?

Dialogue builds understanding of yourself and others

"Wisdom lives between people." (9)

The participants felt that peer learning and sharing experiences were important during the lockdown. They found that dialogue strengthens empathy, reduces stress and thus builds mental resilience. The dialogues offered ideas and solutions to problems that the lockdown has created in their lives and work. It was also important for them to know that issues raised in the dialogues are brought to the attention of decision-makers.

Dialogues carried out by remote connections highlight the importance of physical encounters, however. While the dialogues allowed the participants to hear, be heard and share different feelings and experiences, they also awakened a desire for physical encounters. This raises the broader question: What will the significance of different encounters – physical and remote – be for people as well as society and its unity in the future?

Facts about the dialogues

– Number of dialogues: 38

– Number of participants: approx. 250

– Locations: Espoo, Eura, Helsinki, Huittinen, Hämeenlinna, Iisalmi, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Kajaani, Kirkkonummi, Kotka, Kuopio, Lahti, Lappeenranta, Mikkeli, Riihimäki, Rovaniemi, Saarijärvi, Suomusjärvi, Tampere, Turku, Tuusula, Vantaa. In addition: Italy, Sweden and Turkey.

– Dialogue organisers who submitted a synopsis (references to the quotations in brackets):

Anna Herlin, the Museum of Finnish Architecture, Children of the Station (9), Crisis Management Initiative - CMI, the Cultura Foundation, Depolarize Project & Federation of Finnish Enterprises (8), Dialogue Academy Aretai Oy (4), Finnish Pensioners' Federation (3), the Timeout Foundation, the Timeout Foundation and the Young Church Association, the City of Espoo, the Finnish Central Association of Families of People with Mental Illness FinFami (6), Fingo (1), the University of Eastern Finland (7), the City of Jyväskylä, Kalliola Settlement, Kalliola Oy, the Church Resources Agency & Ikäarvokas project, the City of Lahti, Mari Tähjä (2), Nicehearts association, Sivis Study Centre, Pro-Tukipiste Association, the Municipality of Tuusula, the Ministry of Finance (5), Active Citizens in Society YAK.