

Summary of the 2020 dialogues

The Lockdown Dialogues probed deeply into conflicting experiences during a year of crisis

Since April, numerous people have encountered each other in the dialogues organised in the midst of the coronavirus crisis. The Lockdown Dialogues coordinated by the Dialogue Academy, the Timeout Foundation, the Ministry of Justice, Sitra and the Ministry of Finance consisted of 232 dialogues organised on nine days. The geographical scope of the discussions extended from Lapland to Uusimaa, from Southwest Finland to North Karelia, from Jordan to the United States.

More than 1,600 people from different parts of Finland and the world have participated in the Lockdown Dialogues. This has been an unprecedented joint effort by citizens and the authorities to increase understanding and build trust in the face of difficult times.

The experiences of participants from different backgrounds and in a variety of life situations throw light on how the coronavirus epidemic has shaped our lives. The dialogues gave people an opportunity to pause in the middle of the crisis and hear others while also listening to themselves. The insights created by the dialogues as a result of this method are often deeper, more diverse, and better thought out than views expressed in everyday situations.

Monthly summaries were compiled of the Lockdown Dialogues, which significantly complement the overall picture of how the coronavirus crisis has impacted Finnish society. The summaries strive to convey the moods of the discussions and echoes of participants' voices.

The summaries have been and will be used in numerous contexts in central and local government's decision-making and governance. All citizens can also access them on the website of [the Timeout Foundation](#).

Above all, the dialogues show that the continuing state of emergency is a tense and contradictory experience for citizens in many ways.

In these discussions, which continued from spring till the beginning of the Christmas period, people talk about how the crisis has shaped their everyday lives, the joys and challenges of remote work and distance learning, the rise and fall of a new interest in values, fluctuations in people's willingness to help others, the emergence of a new sense of togetherness and, on the other hand, the shrinking circles and constantly changing future scenarios.

It appears that while the exceptional times have awakened our worst fears, they have also fed our greatest hopes.

We would like to extend our warmest thanks to all dialogue organisers and participants. The Lockdown Dialogues will continue in March 2021.

Daily life adapts to different stages of the crisis

Participants noted that one way or another, the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic made almost everyone stop in their tracks. The emergency conditions forced people to focus on basic things as

restrictive measures transformed daily life by shutting the citizens in their homes. However, many quickly found workable solutions for their everyday lives.

Companies, entrepreneurs and work organisations also started developing practices for the new situation. Relief from anxiety and uncertainty was sought in the small joys of everyday life, family and friends, spirituality and watching nature in springtime. When planning their holidays, people chose domestic destinations, seeking and finding new, inspiring attractions close by.

As the spring went on, participants described themselves as living in an exhausting state of waiting. Only as restrictions were lifted and summer holidays were approaching did they find some relief. Finally, you could go out and meet people again!

While it was a relief to be out and about and meet people, it was not quite the same as before, as the fear of becoming ill and infecting others was always there. Some participants were even more worried about the epidemic spreading as the restrictions were eased.

The epidemic began to gather momentum again in the autumn. This was reflected in the dialogues as constant cautiousness and feelings of uncertainty and insecurity.

As the autumn went on, little remained of the experiences of caring and togetherness, revived relationship with nature and willingness to be merciful towards oneself and others, which had come up in the dialogues of the spring.

The central aspects of life – work, studies, hobbies and travel – were on hold again, or had changed their form. The coronavirus also changed the way people celebrated Christmas. In the last dialogues of the year, people talked about being tired and exhausted, but there were also glimpses of hope.

Discovering the pros and cons of remote work and distance learning

As the emergency conditions first began, a large proportion of Finns switched to working remotely ‘overnight’. Work and school were managed using remote connections. The digital leap of the spring was a cause for excitement and pride.

Transferring work and studies to an online environment has not been straightforward, however. It has required learning new skills, instruction and effective communication.

Many participants pointed out that the digital leap also creates inequalities. Not all work can be performed remotely, which means that people in different jobs do not face the same risk of falling ill.

There are also many people who do not have the necessary devices and skills. Some schoolchildren had suffered from a lack of working equipment, adequate support and school meals when locked out of the classroom.

Many students had their plans for exchange studies and internships cancelled. Those who graduated in the spring found it difficult to get jobs. Participants feared that these consequences would have far-reaching effects on young people's future job opportunities.

As the autumn came, new capabilities for remote work had been developed. Where necessary, people were able to switch smoothly from on-site work to remote work and vice versa. Employers have

also learned to identify those tasks that can be done and supervised remotely and those that require close contact.

Participants found that a change in working methods does not eliminate the need to meet co-workers and receive support. Especially those working in a supervisory role said that it is difficult to get a precise idea of the work quality and staff members' well-being via remote connections. The long-term impacts of remote work were also gradually becoming apparent. Some enjoy it and experience it as a more meaningful and efficient way to work. For others, it is overwhelming, lonely and demoralising.

In particular, remote work and distance learning make transition phases and starting something new more difficult than usually. Transitions from a day-care centre to school or one level of education to the next, beginning university studies or starting a new job are situations where the importance of a physical community is emphasised.

For young people at school age who participated in the dialogues, the decision not to close the schools in the autumn was important. Distance learning in the spring was not a proper replacement for normal school attendance where teachers and friends lend structure and meaning to studying.

Young people said that distance learning had significantly increased their use of digital devices, which was already at a high level. As a result, physical presence has begun to feel more valuable than before.

Distance learning also had a significant impact on the lives of the students who participated in the dialogues. While team spirit helped students and teachers cope with distance learning in the spring, in the autumn they were hit by fatigue and loneliness.

Especially those who started their studies this year found things difficult. New students do not learn their way around the campus, it is more difficult for them to get to know other students, and tutors can also only be reached by remote connections. In an environment such as this, students often feel that studying consists of meaningless execution of tasks.

The spring brought a new interest in values, but was it lost in the autumn?

The emergency conditions left people shaken and made them think about their values. The threatening situation led many to reflect on what is really important in life. Loved ones, home, health, food, neighbours, school, work and connecting with nature took on a new value.

In particular, the experience of shared humanity gathered strength. Most participants said they had thought about how the crisis affects the lives of people in different positions in Finland and elsewhere in the world.

The crisis also awakened a new awareness of your own and other people's mortality. This made choices based on your personal values and efforts to create a better world seem more important. In the meantime, the restrictions put in place were considered harsh when facing grief and death. Nothing can replace the importance of presence and touch when someone is grieving.

The prolonged isolation has soon continued for a full year, which is a long time especially for many older people who are approaching the end of their lives. When you only have a few years of life

left, you are forced to think about what is still possible and what is not. Many participants have found important resources for this reflection in religion and spiritual communities.

In the spring, participants also reflected on values related to our relationship with nature and to our modes of consumption and work. They hoped that the coronavirus epidemic would mark a turning point towards a more ecologically sustainable and socially equitable world. In the autumn, only traces of this talk remained: as the emergency conditions went on and people grew tired, their hopes and visions became more moderate.

Willingness to help varies depending on the situation and resources

In the first dialogues of the spring, people said they understood their privileged position and the inequalities in Finnish society in a completely new way. They observed inequality in different contexts: in working life, places of residence, life situations, knowledge and skills.

Many participants were concerned over the situation of older people, families who already experienced difficulties before, the long-term unemployed, disadvantaged young people, immigrants and mental health rehabilitees.

Knowing that they were doing better than others gave rise to a strong desire to help. People even kept in touch with family and friends more frequently than before. Concrete offers of assistance with service use and shopping were welcomed.

However, many dialogue participants said they had found no means of helping that suited them, as it was unclear which channels and methods they could use to reach out to the people they were concerned over.

They thus discussed ways of ensuring that people's willingness to help and the existing channels for providing assistance could meet in a meaningful way. Some also worried that helping others could exhaust them and use up their meagre resources.

In particular, the ability of NGOs to respond quickly to the changed situation came up in the dialogues of the spring. It was a relief for many participants to see that NGOs offered help and support for vulnerable people.

However, professionals and NGOs employees who participated in the dialogues said they had noticed how many people in need of help had fallen through the safety nets maintained by public services and NGOs. Are there those among us whose distress goes unseen by anyone?

There was less talk of helping in the autumn than in the spring. Not knowing what the future would bring was frustrating, and everyday uncertainty took a toll on both the body and the mind. Participants described a constant feeling of insecurity, which was intertwined with many uncertainties. Will the schools stay open? Will it soon be necessary to place restrictions on meetings and hobby groups again? How far will my personal resources stretch?

Some dialogue participants noted that as life revolves around their safe haven with their family and closest friends, the problems encountered by other people are not visible to them. On the other hand, some said they had done so much to look after others that they had neglected their personal

well-being. It appeared that responsibility for helping other people who experience difficulties was left to a dwindling group of people.

Communities have evolved but also become isolated

The dialogues approached from many angles the way in which human communities operate and remain together in a state of emergency. The lockdown shifted the boundaries between people in both physical and online encounters. As the summer came and some of the restrictions were lifted, meeting people did not feel the same as before. You could not go near other people or give them a hug.

Many said they suffered from a lack of physical encounters and felt that something essential was missing in their lives. Genuine closeness, a deeper understanding of others and spontaneous creativity are absent in remote connections.

Despite this, the dialogues of the spring highlighted the way in which communality had grown stronger during the crisis and found new forms. The shared will to survive connected people, and they even kept in touch with family and friends more frequently than before.

The increased use of remote connections also brought people closer together across geographical distances. It appeared that society could also keep going while relying on remote connections.

From the very beginning of the emergency conditions, however, participants were concerned over those who are excluded from communities. As the crisis prolonged, signs of declining and fracturing communality were seen.

Participants wondered if people would end up only acting in their personal interest and defending their territories. Will communality break down as individuals' psychological resilience fails?

As the autumn arrived, it was indeed felt that the team spirit had withered. If people previously upheld a spirit of togetherness at the level of the nation, their home municipality or their work community, in the autumn its scope appeared to have shrunk further.

As the epidemic continued and new restrictions were brought in, people started carefully selecting those who they meet. Relationships with people close to you and especially those living in the same household with you intensify. On the other hand, social encounters at work and in hobby groups are limited. In particular, this appeared to affect the well-being of many people who live alone.

Some of the participants noted a division in societal discussion which can, for example, be seen in the debate on vaccines and distrust in how other people choose to comply with the instructions. They also felt that racist speech and conspiracy theories were proliferating.

Some expressed concern over how staying in your own bubble in this way could lead to a lack of understanding for the different situations and challenges faced by other people.

This journey under emergency conditions, which has soon lasted a full year, has also given rise to unexpected experiences of closeness and community spirit as well as shaken up accustomed roles. The coronavirus has made participants aware of how important social encounters, other people and communities are. They hope that these are riches we can also enjoy once the emergency conditions are over.

The authorities keep things running, NGOs show their strength

Throughout the year, a strong trust in the authorities' work has emanated from the dialogues. Participants have mainly seen the restriction as necessary and well-timed measures. They welcomed the adherence to parliamentary and evidence-based decision-making in Finland.

They found that cooperation between the authorities and NGOs worked exceptionally well during the crisis. On the other hand, they were irritated by not knowing clearly which instructions issued by the authorities were recommendations and which were orders. They also wished for communication in a larger selection of languages.

Many central government and municipal authorities also organised their own Lockdown Dialogues. These discussions showed that public sector actors ranging from teachers to legislators were finding life difficult.

Employees have adapted their work as required by the crisis and tried to navigate a sometimes chaotic work environment. However, the authorities who participated in the dialogues expressed their strong commitment to taking care of their responsibilities and felt proud that the wheels are also kept turning during the crisis.

In addition to the authorities, civil society actors have supported the foundations of society. The importance of NGOs has been emphasised, particularly in the organisation of assistance in the midst of the crisis. Dialogue participants included many NGO professionals who encounter vulnerable people in their work.

The lockdown conditions have made their work more difficult, too. 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. NGOs were also concerned over keeping people active and ensuring that at-risk groups and older people can join in.

New skills have been learned in NGO activities, and new practices have been developed. Participants noted that different practices of remote work and electronic interaction are here to stay.

Remote connections cannot completely replace face-to-face meetings in assistance work, however. 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.

Many vulnerable groups of people are difficult to reach and cannot be helped via remote connections alone. NGO actors estimated that the need for assistance will also not disappear once the epidemic is over. Will the resources needed to cope with this be there?

What will my life and our shared world look like after the coronavirus pandemic?

Many dialogues during the year reflected on the future. At the very beginning of the emergency conditions, many participants anticipated that the crisis triggered by a global pandemic would permanently change the world.

For many, it seemed that humanity will finally come to realise how unsustainable our current way of life is. The future world must be fairer, and more humane and environmentally friendly.

As the crisis continued, however, the talk about future turned more moderate and adapted to the prevailing situation. In the autumn, great visions were replaced by more focused sources of hope: meaningful organisation of your own life, questioning the value of a lifestyle which consists of executing tasks, strengthening local communities and well-functioning digital practices at work.

Participants in the dialogues of late 2020 wondered how they could get through the winter, if the coronavirus vaccine is safe, and if one day they could travel again.

Levels of faith in a good future have varied strongly during the year. Over time, a large proportion of the participants have noted that the future is in many ways obscure, whether talking about their own lives or the state of the world. The world is no longer as safe as we had imagined.

The coronavirus epidemic showed that threats of a completely new type can emerge rapidly. While people do not have strong confidence in the future, neither do they appear to have sunk into despair. The current year has showed how things that seemed impossible before the crisis can be accomplished in a short period.

Many hopes are placed on a future that remains unknown. In the future, better problem-solving skills and ability for continuous learning will be needed.

People expect technology to take new strides forward. As digitalisation facilitates more widespread use of remote work, some office spaces will no longer be needed. This will affect people's living and mobility. At the same time, participants call for a stronger community spirit and new ways of doing things together.

On the other hand, they are concerned over the mental and economic price paid for the crisis measures. What will happen to businesses, entrepreneurs and jobs? Who will look after the children, youngsters and older people who have been left in the margins of society? Will other illnesses of the body and the mind remain untreated when the focus is on the coronavirus? What types of long-term multiplier effects will these issues have?

Dialogue is necessary in the midst of a crisis

In almost all of the 232 dialogues held over the past year, participants stressed the importance of coming together as well as encountering and listening to others. Participants said they gained understanding, strength and hope from the dialogues.

Most of the dialogues are organised through remote connections. Again and again, people were surprised by the fact that we can understand each other and become understood, even when we meet through a screen or sometimes just an audio connection people who were previously complete strangers and who live around the country and the rest of the world. Experiences like this will also carry us in the future.

Facts about the dialogues (year 2020 total)

Number of dialogues: 232

Number of participants: more than 1,600 people

Locations: Ahvenanmaa, Akaa, Espoo, Eura, Hanko, Helsinki, Huittinen, Hämeenlinna, Iisalmi, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Kajaani, Kerava, Kirkkonummi, Kotka, Kouvola, Kuopio, Lahti, Lappeenranta, Laukaa, Lohja, Mikkeli, Mustasaari, Nokia, Porvoo, Riihimäki, Rovaniemi, Saarijärvi, Salo, Seinäjoki, Siilinjärvi, Suomensjärvi, Tammisaari, Tampere, Turku, Tuusula, Oulu, Vantaa, Ähtäri, and via remote connections, different locations in Finland and abroad (Croatia, the Netherlands, Spain, the United Kingdom, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Jordan, France, Sweden, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, the United States).

Dialogue organisers who submitted a synopsis:

ABF – Åland, Anna Herlin, Anna-Maija Hakuni-Luoma, Museum of Finnish Architecture, Children of the Station, Creve 2.0, Community Power/Tuovi Leppänen, Crisis Management Initiative - CMI, Cultura Foundation, Depolarize Project & Federation of Finnish Enterprises, Dialogue Academy Aretai Oy, Dialogic Oy & Finnish Supervisors' Association, Eeva Nummi & Anita Nikkanen, Finnish Pensioners' Federation, Central Association of Finnish Pensioners, En säker hamn, Finnish Epilepsy Association, Timeout Foundation, Timeout Foundation & Inno Ok, Timeout Foundation & Young Church Association, Timeout Foundation & Plan International Finland, Timeout Foundation & Diocese of Tampere, European Youth Parliament & UN Youth of Finland, City of Espoo, Finnish Central Association of Families of People with Mental Illness FinFami, Hanaholmen, Deaconess Foundation, Helsinki City Museum, Helsinki Cathedral Parish/Dialogues of Hope, Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities, University of Eastern Finland, University of Eastern Finland/Centre for Continuous Learning, City of Jyväskylä, UN Association of Jyväskylä, Kalliola Settlement, Kalliola Oy, citizens Katja, Timo & Ilona, Advisory Board on Civil Society Policy KANE, Kaskas Media, National Church Council/the church's work with expatriate Finns, Church Resources Agency & Oulu Deaconess Institute ODL/Ikäärvokas project, City of Kotka & Kotka-Kymi Parish & Koskenrinneyhdistys, City of Lahti, Regional Council of Lapland, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finnish Missionary Society & the Deaconess Foundation, Association for Rural Culture and Education, Maija Vähämäki/Turku School of Economics, Malmi Parish, Marhaban-center/Tampere Parishes and Diocese of Tampere, Mari Tähjä & Jani Turku, MDI Oy, Marja Lindholm, Naistenkartano, Nicehearts, Finnish National Agency for Education, Sivis Study Centre, Pesäpuu Association, Pro-tukipiste association, Seta – LGBTI Rights in Finland, Sitra, Centre for Education and Research on Social and Health Services & AI Academy/University of Turku, Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees STTK, Finnish Development NGOs Fingo, Finnish Cultural and Academic Institutes, Teacher Student Union of Finland, Finnish Parents' League, UN Youth of Finland, Sylva Association, Evangelic-Lutheran parishes of Tampere & Diocese of Tampere, UN Association of Tampere TAYK, Tiina and Antti Herlin Foundation, Union of Private Sector Professionals ERTO, Toni Kuoremäki, Turku Chamber of Commerce, Turku Cathedral Parish/Dialogues of Hope, Municipality of Tuusula, National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland, Vake Oy, Ministry of Finance, Active Citizens in Society – YAK, Youthwork for Resilience training programme.