

LOCKDOWN DIALOGUES

Crisis experiences and model
for national dialogue

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SITRA STUDIES is a publication series which focuses on the conclusions and outcomes of Sitra's future-oriented work.

*"We are in the same storm,
but in different boats.
Some have engines,
some are rowing".*

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Foreword

When this publication was all but ready for completion, we thought we were nearing the end of the biggest crisis of our time. Things turned out quite differently. We have since witnessed how crises linked, one overlapping the other. Since the outbreak of the most recent war in Europe, we are forced to ask ourselves, what things are the most important ones to us and what we are prepared to do to defend them. We have asked the same questions throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, we have to consider our choices with even more care and consideration.

Global crises create uncertainty, anxiety and fear. However, they can also give rise to new ways of bringing people together, to look after our fellow human beings and to focus on the future when times are precarious. Lockdown Dialogues are a major social innovation born out of a major crisis. The idea was simple. Invite people together to share their experiences, listen to each other and to reflect on what is important to us in this moment in time. When launching LD, we believed that dialogues such as these would help build mutual trust between people in crisis and create optimism in the face of an unpredictable future. We believed that people in Finland and elsewhere would be willing to engage in a constructive conversation even in situations when tensions between individuals and groups are growing. This publication is proof that our expectations were not misplaced.

Methodologically, LD was based on the Timeout concept which is a method for constructive and creative discussion. The Timeout Dialogues provided a place and time for people to pause, take stock of the situation and be empowered in the midst of a pandemic. The accessibility of the method as well as the support available made it possible to anyone to organise their own Lockdown Dialogue. As a result, more than 100 organisers around Finland representing all sectors of society participated. Every single dialogue was significant with notable impact. Many of the over 2,000 participants agreed that the dialogue had helped them understand the situation and rebuild their confidence in the future and feel hopeful.

The publication describes the key principles of Lockdown Dialogues: collaboration on a transparent and equal basis. The Lockdown Dialogues was a unique exercise and joint effort by the civic society and authorities, which was successfully completed with big mental input while keeping the financial cost highly affordable. Working together in an inclusive and equitable manner ranged from participating in and organising Timeout discussions to coordinating and steering the Lockdown Dialogues on the whole. Nationwide summaries were regularly prepared of the content of the dialogues and published openly available for everyone. The whole manifests in a miniature scale how we wish the democratic society to work, also in times of crisis.

We would like to extend our gratitude to everyone who was involved in the Lockdown Dialogues. Without you, we would not know the amount of power that dialogue has in a crisis situation as well. With the understanding we gained from you, we are convinced that we will continue to have ways of sticking to our key values.

The publication is dedicated to the memory of our colleague Johanna Nurmi, who diligently and wisely worked with the Lockdown Dialogues.

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Summary

The Lockdown Dialogues were an extensive series of Timeout dialogues that aimed to increase our understanding of life during the pandemic. This publication illustrates the importance and opportunities for enhancing participation and building trust in Finnish society through an extensive case example of Lockdown Dialogues.

The Lockdown Dialogue data, based on the experiences of people of different ages, different situations in life and different social groups, offers a unique insight into daily life, concerns and desires during exceptional times.

The dialogues outline the impacts of the pandemic on relationships between people, inequality and divisions made visible by the exceptional situation, changes in values and experiences of trust and distrust.

The publication also introduces a model for national dialogue as a new way of promoting constructive social discussion between the public, the authorities and decision-makers.

National dialogues provide a method of discussing issues important to people and communities in a way that enhances participation and creates a pluralistic understanding of the challenges at hand. Creating social dialogue and building structures to sustain this dialogue help us face and overcome the challenges of the future.

Sammanfattning

Dialoger i rådande undantagstillstånd var en omfattande serie av Dialogpaus-samtal som skapade insikter om livet under pandemin. Denna publikation presenterar en omfattande fallstudie av dessa dialoger. Målet är att beskriva dialogens betydelse och potential när det gäller att skapa delaktighet och förtroende i det finländska samhället.

Dialogmaterialet består av erfarenheter som gjorts av människor i olika åldrar, livssituationer och samhällsgrupper. Det erbjuder unika inblickar i vardagen, bekymren och förhoppningarna under undantagstiden.

Samtalen visar också hur pandemin påverkat människors relationer, vilka former av ojämlikhet den gett upphov till och hur den förändrat värderingarna. Den visar också vilka upplevelser av förtroende och brist på förtroende människor haft.

Publikationen presenterar dessutom en modell för nationell dialog, som är ett nytt sätt att stimulera konstruktiva samhälleliga samtal mellan medborgare, myndigheter och beslutsfattare.

I den nationella dialogen samtalar deltagarna om ämnen som är viktiga för människor och gemenskaper på ett sätt som gör delaktigheten starkare och skapar flerstämmiga insikter om aktuella utmaningar. När vi skapar dialog och dialogiska strukturer i samhället blir det lättare för oss att möta framtidens utmaningar och att övervinna dem tillsammans.

Introduction

In early 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic changed life in Finland all at once. The pandemic impacted social relationships, work and studies and people's experiences of safety and trust. Lockdown Dialogues began in the middle of the uncertainty during the first spring of COVID-19 and continued until the end of 2021. It was a social innovation that strengthened participation. It helped to create an understanding of how different kinds of people in different situations in life experienced their lives during the pandemic through a series of extensive dialogical discussions.

Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, dialogues functioned as spaces of halting and sharing experiences, making it possible to constructively address concerns, desires and views of the future. However, the social significance of Lockdown Dialogues is more extensive than a single point in time. Building dialogical practices for the operations of the people and societies involved and using the understanding emerging from dialogues in society will help us to also encounter future challenges and deal with them together.

Two points of view: experiences and model

This publication illustrates the importance and opportunities for enhancing participation and building trust in society through an extensive case example of Lockdown Dialogues. The Lockdown Dialogues are described from two complementary points of view:

The first section describes Finnish people's diverse experiences of life during COVID-19 based on Lockdown Dialogue data. The Lockdown Dialogue data comprised 296 discussions and more than two thousand people of different ages, different situations in life and different social groups offers a unique

view into day-to-day life, concerns and desires amidst exceptional times. Based on the data, one can outline people's experiences at different stages of the pandemic, the sense of community and inequality caused by the crisis, the participants' deliberations of values and the future, and the building of trust and challenges to it in a crisis situation. Above all, the dialogue data includes people's day-to-day lives, emotions and experiences in the discussion of the pandemic, which has been characterised by epidemiology, restrictions and decision-making.

The second part provides a description of a model of national dialogue, meaning a new way of giving birth to constructive social discussion and strengthening dialogue between common people, the authorities and decision-makers. The key parties involved in the national dialogue, procedures and prerequisites for success are presented in this context using experiences and examples from the Lockdown Dialogues. It also includes lessons learned from organising dialogues and the importance of the information produced in them, as well as insights into the application of the model in different scales.

Dialogue that enhances participation

Participation refers to a sense of belonging, the feeling that there is a place for one in the world. It also means an opportunity for engaging in and influencing matters that concern oneself and society. Lockdown Dialogues built the sense of participation at three levels: a low threshold of participation, feeling of being heard in the dialogue and compiling the output of the discussions for the entire society to use.

In Lockdown Dialogues, anyone could become an organiser or participant after

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

Dialogue refers to a specific way of discussion that aims to increase understanding of the topic, other people and oneself. Dialogue examines the meanings of things based on the different experiences of people. In dialogue, all points of view and experiences are valuable in building a better understanding.

In social challenges and situations filled with tensions, it is particularly important to make room for dialogue. Constructive discussion and encountering others with respect strengthen trust and equality and thereby create a foundation for solving problems together. Dialogue is needed at all levels of society from local communities to global decision-making.

Alhanen, Kai (2016). *Dialogue in Democracy*. Books on Demand. 2019

agreeing to certain basic principles that promote dialogue. In all, dialogues were organised by 111 parties, ranging from NGOs, municipalities, businesses and religious and spiritual organisations to government and private individuals. More than 2,100 people took part in the dialogues. Particular attention was paid to ensuring that the voice of the most vulnerable members of society would be heard in the discussions.

The dialogues were not instructed or controlled based on strict agenda; instead, it was trusted that meaningful discussion would emerge from encounters and sharing experiences. The aim was not to solve any pre-defined issue, but to engage in open discussion about things that the participants deemed important. This way, important themes and insights emerged in the dialogues from among the participants their experiences.

The Timeout method used in the dialogues made equal participation, listening and being heard possible. The situational picture emerging from the participants' experiences in the dialogues was pluralist and nuanced. The dialogue participants also felt that the discussions supported them in the uncertainty caused by the crisis and offered resources and peer support for well-being.

The experience of participation was strengthened by the dialogues being documented and compiled into public summaries

for all people, discussion organisers, the authorities and government to use. The dialogue analyses were diversely used in, for example, COVID-19 preparedness work and the steering of the Ministry of Finance governance policy, as materials for the national co-ordination of the pandemic, planning COVID-19 exit procedures and the trust evaluation published by the OECD. The dialogue summaries that illustrated people's emotions strengthened the connection of the government to people's experiences, thereby creating a new kind of dialogue between common people and the administration. The discussion organisers also used the outputs of their dialogues in developing their own activities.

All of this resulted in the Lockdown Dialogue structure that strengthens participation: anyone can organise a dialogue in their own communities or for their own target groups and thereby process and make visible the thoughts and experiences of their communities. Individual people can join the discussion with a low threshold, and the dialogical method allows people to feel that they are being heard. The dialogue summaries, on the other hand, make the understanding that emerged in the dialogues part of the big social picture. In terms of the method of implementation, the Lockdown Dialogues were a unique joint effort of common people, various NGOs and organisations and public authorities.

1 Life in lockdown

This section dives into the content of the Lockdown Dialogues: the diverse experiences of Finnish people of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. This extensive case example of national dialogue illustrates the importance of dialogue in building understanding and trust in society. The discussions outline the impacts of the pandemic on relationships between people and on their day-to-day lives, changes in values, inequal-

ity and divisions made visible by the exceptional situation and experiences of trust and distrust in relation to fellow people, decision-making and society. The second part of the publication describes in more detail how the model of national dialogue gives rise to societal discussion in a new way and illustrates the points of view relating to its implementation and success.

Figure 1. Key words of the discussion



Key figures and data of Lockdown Dialogues

13

rounds of dialogues, starting in April 2020 and ending in December 2021

296

A total 296 discussions

2130

2 130 discussion participants, including artists, child protection services professionals, childcare and education professionals, children, children and young people with cancer and their family members, chronically ill people, church social work professionals and experts by experience, city and municipality employees, civil servants, criminal sanctions sector clients and professionals, culture professionals, decision-makers, delegates, directors of education, elderly people, employee representatives, entrepreneurs and representatives of businesses., event industry professionals, experts by experience, families with two cultural backgrounds, family members of people with mental health issues, Finns living abroad, food producers, freelancers, government employees, grandparents, healthcare professionals, immigrants, joint developers, library professionals, managers and executives, members and employees of parishes, mobility impaired people, municipal decision-makers, NGO activists, NGO activists and professionals, parents of children of different ages, pensioners, people from universities, people laid off, people on probation after prison sentence, priests, professionals in elderly care, professionals in performing arts, professionals in youth work, residents of housing companies, rural people, scholars, sex workers, social welfare professionals, specialists, students, substance abuse rehabilitees, teachers, those in risk groups, trade union members and employees, unemployed people, upper comprehensive school pupils, urban people, volunteers, young influencers, young people.

111

111 organisers, including NGOs, educational organisations, religious and spiritual organisations, cities and municipalities, state government, private individuals, businesses, foundations and project parties.

Discussion organisers that submitted discussion notes or summaries

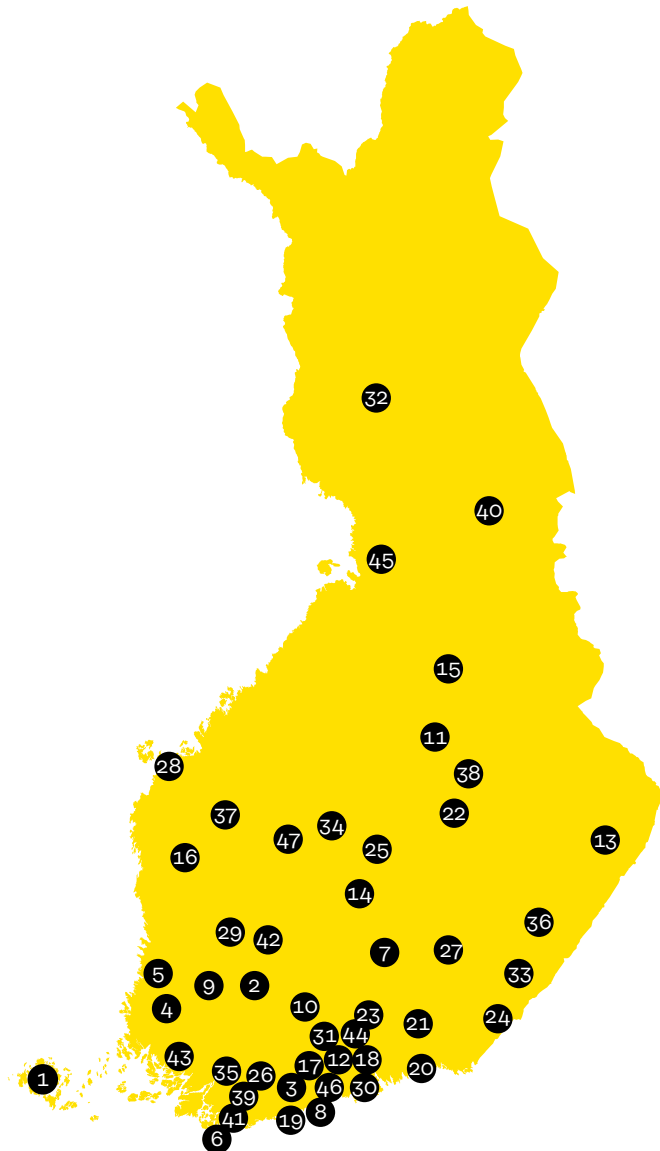
ABF – Åland, A-Clinic Foundation, Active members of society, Advisory Board on Civil Society Policy (KANE), Anna Herlin, Anna-Maija Hakuni-Luoma, Assitej Finland, Association for Rural Culture and Education, Cathedral Parish of Helsinki and Taivalkoski Parish, Cathedral Parish of Helsinki/ Toivon dialogit, Central Association of Finnish Pensioners, Children of the Station, Church Council/Ministry to Finns Abroad, Citizen Forum, Citizens Katja, Timo & Ilona, Eeva Mäkelä, Eeva Nummi & Anita Nikkanen, Mari Tähjä, Mari Tähjä & Jani Turku, City of Espoo, City of Lahti, City of Jyväskylä, City of Kotka & Kotka-Kymi Parish & Koskenrinneryhdistys, City of Tampere, City of Vantaa, Community Power/Tuovi Leppänen, Creve 2.0, Crisis Management Initiative – CMI, Cultura Foundation, Cultural Education Union TAITE's Taidekaari team, D-Asema Kallio and Kannelmäki, Deaconess Foundation, Depolarize project & Federation of Finnish Enterprises, DialogiAkademia Aretai Oy, Dialogic Oy & Finnish Supervisors' Association, EKTURVA/KUNTATURVA, En säker hamn, European Youth Parliament Finland & UN Youth of Finland, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, Familia ry, Families of People with mental illness, Felm & Deaconess Foundation, FinFami – Finnish Central Association of, Finnish Association for ADHD, ADD and MBD and Autism Finland, Finnish Cultural and Academic Institutes (SKTI), Finnish Development NGOs Fingo, Finnish Epilepsy Association, Finnish Lifelong Learning Foundation Kvs, Finnish National Agency for Education, Finnish Parents' League, Finnish Pensioners' Federation, Finnish Red Cross, Finnish Youth Association, Green Women's Association Turku, Hanaholmen, Helsinki City Museum, JAMK University of Applied Sciences, JyYK ry – The United Nations Association of Jyväskylä, Kalliolan Settlement, Kalliola Oy, Kaskas Media, Kirkkopalvelut ry

& Oulu Deaconess Institute, Lahti Public Library, Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Maija Vähämäki/Turku School of Economics, Malmi Parish, Marhaban-keskus/Tampere parishes and Diocese of Tampere, Marja Lindholm, MDI Oy, Metropolia's Hippa-Remote and Hytke projects, Mindful Engineering Oy/ Hanna Korttejärvi, Ministry of Finance, Municipality of Tuusula, Museum of Finnish Architecture, National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland (CORE Forum), Naistenkartano, Nicehearts ry, ODL ry/Ikäarvokas project, Pesäpuu ry, Pro-tukipiste ry, Regional Council of Lapland, SAK, Seta ry, Siskot ja Simot, Sitra, Siviis Study, Centre, Sote Academy & AI Academy/ University of Turku, STTK, Suomen Nuorisopisto Paukkula, Sylva ry, The Committee of 100 and peace organisations, The Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities, Tainionvirta Parish, Tampere Evangelical Lutheran parishes & Diocese of Tampere, Tampere parishes, Teacher Student Union of Finland (SOOL), Tiina and Antti Herlin Foundation, Timeout Foundation, Timeout Foundation & Inno Ok, Timeout Foundation & Nuori kirkko, Timeout Foundation & Plan Finland, Timeout Foundation & Diocese of Tampere, ToimistoSissit/Ideapakka, Toni Kuoremäki, Turku Cathedral Parish/Toivon dialogit, Turku Chamber of Commerce, Union of Private Sector Professionals ERTO, United Nations Association of Tampere (TAYK ry), UN Youth of Finland, University of Eastern Finland, University of Eastern Finland/Centre for Continuous Learning, University of Turku Centre for Language and Communication Studies, Vake Oy, VTKL – The Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older People, Youthwork for Resilience training.

Discussion languages: Finnish, Swedish, English, Russian and Arabic.

Figure 2. Lockdown Dialogues on a Finnish map

1. Ahvenanmaa
2. Akaa
3. Espoo
4. Eura
5. Eurajoki
6. Hanko
7. Hartola
8. Helsinki
9. Huittinen
10. Hämeenlinna
11. Iisalmi
12. Järvenpää
13. Joensuu
14. Jyväskylä
15. Kajaani
16. Kauhajoki
17. Kauniainen
18. Kerava
19. Kirkkonummi
20. Kotka
21. Kouvola
22. Kuopio
23. Lahti
24. Lappeenranta
25. Laukaa
26. Lohja
27. Mikkeli
28. Mustasaari
29. Nokia
30. Porvoo
31. Riihimäki
32. Rovaniemi
33. Ruokolahti
34. Saarijärvi
35. Salo
36. Savonlinna
37. Seinäjoki
38. Siilinjärvi
39. Suomensjärvi
40. Taivalkoski
41. Tammisaari
42. Tampere
43. Turku
44. Tuusula
45. Oulu
46. Vantaa
47. Ähtäri



Discussions took place across Finland, from Lapland to Uusimaa and from Southwest Finland to North Karelia. Participants came from the following regions and locations, among others:

Ahvenanmaa, Akaa, Espoo, South Karelia, Eura, Eurajoki, Hanko, Hartola, Helsinki, Huittinen, Hämeenlinna, Iisalmi, Järvenpää, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Kajaani, Kauhajoki, Kauniainen, Kerava, Kirkkonummi, Kotka, Kouvola, Kuopio, Lahti, Lappeenranta, Laukaa, Lohja, Mikkeli, Mustasaari, Nokia,

Porvoo, Riihimäki, Rovaniemi, Ruokolahti, Saarijärvi, Salo, Savonlinna, Seinäjoki, Siilinjärvi, Suomensjärvi, Taivalkoski, Tammisaari, Tampere, Turku, Tuusula, Oulu, Vantaa and Ähtäri.

There were also participants from the following countries: the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, United Kingdom, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Croatia, France, Sweden, Germany, Slovakia, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Estonia and the United States.

Dialogue data and its analysis

The data of the Lockdown Dialogues is comprised of notes and records submitted by the discussion organisers. The organisers were instructed to have a scribe present in every dialogue. The records of the discussions were submitted to the Timeout Foundation using a web form asking for the number of participants, theme, content and key insights, as well as experiences and feedback on organising the discussion.

The majority of the data was in Finnish, but there were also dialogues in Swedish and English, as well as discussions in Arabic and Russian that were also reported in Finnish. The style of the discussion records ranged from concise summaries to word-for-word transcriptions. The data was therefore very varied: some of the notes indicated the key themes and topics in a concise form, while the more detailed records also brought up how the shared mindset emerged and interaction and trust was built between the participants.

My first encounter with the data was when analysing the data of each round of discussions starting in April 2020, and compiling summaries of them. I worked in the analyser team of four people, and we reviewed the data of each round of discussions together and structured it temporally, thematically and from the point of view of the experiences of different groups of people. In writing the summaries, the focus was on topical situation reports of people's experiences. In particular, we aimed to find out how people's experiences had changed in relation to the previous rounds of discussions.

In this publication, I look at the data as a whole and try to outline the extensive empirical arch that can be seen based on people's experiences over a period of almost two

years. When I began to read the data more closely, I had a sense of the data based on the prior analysis work, having reviewed it in parts already once. When I read the entire data from 296 discussions more closely as a whole, I also perceived a lot that I had paid less attention to in the monthly situation summaries. People's experiences of isolation, communality and inequality, trust and participation and thoughts and desires concerning the future were outlined in time and in relation to the different stages of the pandemic.

I have read the data simultaneously from the point of view of shared concerns and sources of hope while aiming to outline the differences between the experiences of different groups of people. While analysing, I have been asking: what does all of this say about us as people and society?

In describing the data, I will use a lot of direct quotes to better make the experiences of the participants visible through their own words. All quotes are anonymous. The extent of the data also safeguards the anonymity of the participants; almost 300 discussions and more than 2,100 dialogue participants guarantee that all kinds of experiences and views are shared by many. The quotes concerning the experiences of groups that have been specified or evident from context (such as children and young people, people in risk groups or vulnerable situations or representatives of a certain occupational group) are picked from several different discussions, and the experiences of any group cannot be traced back to an individual discussion. It is also worth noting that many of the key concerns and sources of hope of people were very similar, regardless of their social standing.

What will happen to us? – The virus will live on

Alarming news were heard from around the world in early 2020. The coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, at that point still unknown, made people sick, and it would only be a matter of time before the virus would find its way to Finland. As the number of infections rose, the Government of Finland and the President declared a state of emergency under section 3, subsection 5 of the Emergency Powers Act due to the widespread dangerous communicable disease.

“// Government, in cooperation with the President of the Republic, declares a state of emergency in Finland over coronavirus outbreak”.

The purpose of the state of emergency and associated restrictions was to safeguard the population, secure the functioning of society and business and, in particular, secure healthcare capacity in the pandemic. Pupils and students moved to remote teaching and workplaces to remote work, where possibly. Visiting and using public facilities, services and hobbies was restricted. Efforts were made to restrict all physical interaction between people to a minimum to avoid the uncontrolled transmission of the virus. Day-to-day routines, studies, work, leisure and human relationships all changed at once.

The situation was new to everyone, and completely exceptional. No one knew how the pandemic would develop in Finland and globally, how long we would be living under emergency conditions and what would the impacts be on people's lives, relationships and society. After spring 2020 that required society to be locked down, the transmission situation and related restrictions and recommendations have varied by time and region. When the Lockdown Dialogues ended in

December 2021, a record-high number of infections was again reported.

Stop and breathe

COVIDThe global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which also reached Finland quickly, surprised the majority of the discussion participants completely. The pandemic was a reminder that *“pestilence still kills, the world hasn't changed in that respect”*. With the pandemic, the threat of a serious disease and even death suddenly became present in day-to-day lives: *“it felt as if many people for the first time realised that they are mortal, this wasn't supposed to happen to me”*. For some, even going out of the door felt threatening at first: *“It felt like I would get COVID-19 easily, like from just going outside my home. That was scary”*.

Many of the dialogue participants described the rapid spread of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown of society similar to colliding with a wall: *“It feels like this was a complete stop”*. Suddenly, everything felt strange and reality seemed different and changed: *“My diary is completely clear. That's a very strange situation”*.

The slowing down of life caused by the lockdown and isolation also provided many with a much-needed opportunity for calming down and take a breather: *“When this situation arrived, I felt a relief that now I get to be lazy”*. Many dialogue participants described their normal lives as senseless hurry, buzzing around and performing. When the entire world is at a standstill, it is OK to stop for a while. One person said that they will pile up on resting, another said that they were hibernating. In a slower life, *“one's internal voice grows stronger and those things*

do not come from the outside, instead I genuinely flavour and sense what I'm feeling like". Many of the discussion participants described the lockdown somewhat humouristically as an introvert's golden age: *"you get to be in peace and quiet, don't have to go anywhere"*. Some talked about a relief when they did not have to meet anyone.

In particular, many found delight in wandering in the nature, for which they had time in a new way: *"I walked in the woods with the kids every day, it's peaceful there and the birds are singing"*. Forests became an important place of serenity and composing their thoughts for many, and the progress of the spring was monitored in a new way. *"I'm happy this didn't happen in November!"* many said in spring 2020, when people still did not know that COVID-19 would affect our lives for a long time.

Amidst all the serenity, some of the discussion participants did begin to long after something to do: *"The possibility to take a break felt amazing at first, after a standstill of a couple of months it feels like I just have to get moving and do something"*. The breather began to feel like becoming completely stuck after a while: *"You need to have dreams, visions and plans"*. As the spring progressed, people also began to find out that the pandemic will not be a short transient phase but that they will have to learn to live with it: *"It is a must to take care of things, ride a bus, you can't live in the basement"*.

Coping put to a test, life on hold

The COVID-19 life was described as survival, especially in the 2020 dialogues. The discussion participants' emotions fluctuated and continuous uncertainty was beginning to fatigue them: *"Coping is put to a test, I'm at my limits"*. In small homes, *"food smells all the time in the bedroom"*, when all of the things that previously happened elsewhere from work to hobbies took place at home: *"I study, eat and exercise in a corner"*.

Many people find that other people and the energy from them are the best thing in work, studies and volunteer activities, and *"when they have been suddenly missing altogether, it is possible to see it in your own coping"*. Some felt that their initiative had decreased, and the *"mental slump"* resulted in them not bothering to use the opportunities for meeting friends. *"I'm bored, feels like life is on pause, in a standby state"*.

The pandemic also had effects on the discussion participants' spiritual lives. At first, it felt nice to *"be able to watch different religious services, seeing what is done in different places"*. The presence of people and connection to the parish was, however, longed for, and some felt that *"even God has become more remote"*. Many felt that they would appreciate communion more when it becomes possible again.

Due to isolation, remote work and cancellation of social events, some people were left very much alone. In particular, many people living on their own felt that they were totally alone during the lockdown: *"it is detrimental to the brain and psyche"*. Also because of a disease or belonging to a risk group, *"sheltering at home has been a tough spot, when friends have not been able to see and help me, either"*. It was stated in the discussions that *"the situation in life has a great impact on a person's experience of the COVID-19 times"*, and that *"there are lots of differences in people's loneliness, depending on whether they have family at home or have dared to see friends"*.

"It's good to stay home if you have the people you want to be with there", one of the discussion participants said. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 life was also exhausting to people with families. Full working days, child care and assisting children in their remote schooling was backbreaking to many: *"A few weeks of a squeeze was manageable. I can't keep on running this thing for months"*. The sense of insufficiency bothered when one was supposed to work and take care of children at home at the same time: *"Bad*

employee – bad mother, not possible to succeed in either". Work easily continued to the evening when some remote working days were spent on cooking, supporting school-children and paying attention to younger ones: *"Can't look at the state of the home"*. It was more than one time that one of the other discussion participants said that *"I would not have survived the COVID-19 phase with really young children"*. Both parents and their offspring longed for moments of serenity and space within the walls of their own home: *"It would be wonderful to have a cup of coffee after the working day, but someone in the same room wants to listen to rap music"*.

After the tight restrictions in spring 2020 and living inside four walls, there were lots of expectations for the summer. The easing of the strictest restrictions did in fact make many people's lives easier: *"My vibe got really much easier when information about easing was received"*. *"I will survive after all, everything's just fine"*. People with families were relieved when children got back to schools, daycare and playing with friends. *"A very peculiar and very long spring"* was beginning to be a thing of the past, and life seemed to get easier. In the summer, people dared to meet others again, travel at least in Finland, breathe.

After the freer summer, it was a major disappointment that the pandemic situation began to get worse again towards the autumn. The spring fears returned, and life felt like an eternal November. During the second COVID-19 spring after the long autumn, many felt that they were at their limits of coping: *"I was completely exhausted, I had been trying so hard for a year"*. Another person said that *"I have managed until this spring, but a couple of weeks ago it began to feel like now I'm going to run away and go somewhere"*. At this point, people could also start looking back, which in many brought up the idea that *"it's lucky we didn't know a year ago how long this will continue"*. However, many found that the lockdowns and restrictions have been easier to endure because they have been intermittent.

In autumn 2021, life was considered to have normalised at least to some extent, with the return of hobbies and social contacts. Many had gotten back to the gym, theatre or cinema. This gave rise to joy and hope among the dialogue participants, but at the same time, many were worried that *"what if the infection situation gets worse again and we return to the lockdown and cancellation limbo"*. Many simply felt that they were *"too tired to monitor the situation and get worried about it."* Even though it was a good thing to let loose of stress, many were also puzzled by content and indifference: *"I realised that I have sort of gotten content with the situation and therefore calmed down, but I don't know if that's only a good thing"*.

The long emergency state was also deemed to leave scars on one's social tolerance and emphasise the rough edges of personality. In conflict situations, the discussion participants were surprised with their own strong reactions, and a quarrel brought up by safe distances in a shop queue, for example, gave rise to pondering: *"Is this what I have become, and is this caused by also something else with this pandemic"*. On the other hand, one's own and others' adaptability was also surprising: *"Humans are quite adaptable. First we were in a sort of panic, then we gradually started to get used to it and then we began to find solutions"*.

Physical intimacy and importance of touch

The pandemic and the social isolation to keep infections under control have had a major impact on people's interactions and sense of intimacy. The lack of presence, encounters and physical proximity created a sense of withering away: *"I feel like a plant without water"*. The discussions characterised humans as social animals and the break of connection as a tragedy. Also, reading faces and expressions is important in social interaction. Because of face masks, some were worried that *"it's*

starting to feel insecure when we can't do this". One of the participants thought "that all of this will leave a mark that will remain visible for a very long time, even forever in the all of us. Especially children and young people".

Many of the dialogue participants were distressed that due to fearing infection, other people began to be seen as threats to safety: *"for example in dealings, people get startled".* Even watching TV, people get irritated that *"They are hugging there!". "The most difficult thing is not being able to touch and hug,"* as one of the discussion participants expressed the shared emotions. It felt particularly bad not to be allowed to hug one's own grown-up children or elderly parents. People have unlearned spontaneous expressions of affection due to not being able to just *"hug without care and sit next to each other and sense".* Some of the participants reported that they had been completely without touching for a long time: *"I haven't been able to touch other people for two months".*

All kinds of doing things together and partying were missed: *"I miss going to gigs and dancing with others".* On the other hand, there were also those who felt it safe that in these times, *"nobody suddenly comes and hugs you without permission".* It has been OK to be an introvert and shy. Also minding one's own business has decreased the discussion participants' social tolerance: *"you get tired easier nowadays when you're with people".*

The discussion participants were distressed that grandchildren and grandparents, for example, could not safely see each other. One grandparent had gone to a park to watch their grandchildren *"a little farther away, fortunately looking has not been prohibited".* Another one hoped *"to get to see the grandchildren once more before dying".* One grandchild said that *"cannot have hugged grandma for a year, I'm afraid she'll die before I get to hug her".* A grandparent of one of the discussion participant had told that they *"would rather die of COVID-19 than loneliness".*

It is in presence of death that the COVID-19 restrictions seemed the most wretched. The

participants were puzzled by not being able to attend a deceased close one's funeral: *"A lot of grief remains unprocessed because of COVID-19, not being able to convene and attend the funeral".* No virtual remote touch replaces being able to support a grieving person by hugging, and being hugged. In these times, there is great empathy towards the ill and dying: *"when you are alone somewhere and about to die and nobody can visit you".* Family members also worry for their close ones in hospitals and care homes. There are concerns *"whether the ill close person understands why family has not visited them".* On the telephone, one does not always get enough information about *"what is actually happening to the family member at the place of care".*

In nursing and care work, touching is important and *"increases the sense of dignity and that someone cares".* Both family members and professionals wondered how those cared for will cope if touching was left out. The other side of the coin are the risks to which those working in physical proximity are exposed to at work as well as the possibility of protecting oneself from these risks. An early childhood educator cannot tell a small child that *"you cannot sit on my lap because of COVID".* Also, those in youth work said that now if ever *"young people need close care and encounters".* Wearing face masks in care work, *"you increasingly need to work with your eyes and voice is important".*

Being physically far from other people also led to an experience of mental remoteness in many people's lives. Some of the dialogue participants feared that we will get too addicted to the digital world and physical encounters will become a luxury product: *"come and experience IRL".* Many thought about whether it would change us as people to do things increasingly virtually. *"Can the ability to interact be impaired?"* or *"will you be able to look and observe the surroundings again?"*

At the same time, it is digital platforms and tools that have made contacts and a sense of communality possible in the exceptional times:

“before COVID-19, it was said that these platforms will have the effect of people no longer seeing each other face-to-face and separating people from each other (...), what then happened, it is these platforms that have created a sense of communality”. However, the issue is more complicated for those suffering from social media or gaming addiction, for example: *“It is difficult to keep control and place limits because digital devices were the only window to the outside world during the COVID-19 times”.*

Weighing risks and responsibility in daily life

The risk of getting infected and infecting others has forced people to think about their own actions and responsibility for others. Even small daily choices can be linked to the big picture: *“will I go to the shop to buy something because I’d like to eat that particular dish, or wait for a week to go and pick up a lot of stuff at the same time”.* As infections spread, many were *“thinking of being a threat to other people and then again people need other people, so it’s sort of sad to think about you being a threat”.* In particular, people were afraid that *“I’m a carrier and will infect other people”.* One participant said that they *“got a headache and chills at work and felt like I was a dangerous weapon”.*

Responsibility for other people’s well-being was a burden for many people. When responsible for other people, *“you think about how you can trust all the expert assessments”.* The parents of young children also thought about how to discuss the risks and concerns with children in a comprehensible way and without giving rise to unnecessary fears. Families of young people were thinking about where and how much young people could meet their friends: *“Where, preferably outdoors, we were thinking about suitable places, how many friends they may meet”.* Many also pondered: *“Will I bring a COVID infection from work home?”*

Once the tightest restrictions had been eased, many of the dialogue participants were wondering *“can we celebrate weddings, birthdays, can I invite guests?”* During the tightest restrictions, visiting a close one could make one feel guilty, and social pressure to isolate was visible in that *“if you have had people come over, you might not dare to tell about it on Facebook”.* However, the close ones of some discussion partners frankly wished that *“let’s take the risk and visit rather than stay at home”.* Some also thought: *“it will come if it will, there’s nothing you can do. You don’t have to get exposed on purpose, but you have to do the usual stuff, go to shops and so on”.*

In any case, life amidst the pandemic felt like a continuous risk analysis: *“Getting infected is like a zero-sum game. If you now do something that gets you exposed and you fall ill, and in the worst case even infect your family, following the restrictions and lockdowns for the entire year is like wasted away”.* At the same time, even lifeless life was seen as a risk: *“life cannot be about avoiding risks or making statistically correct decisions”.* Also loneliness causes problems, and suffering can also be *“life without intimacy, close people, being social”.*

A more chill and annoying remote school

The most significant change brought about by COVID-19 in the daily lives of children and young people in spring 2020 and partly also later was school switching to remote connections. The experiences of remote studying of the children and young people who took part in the discussions varied. For others, remote schooling *“has been more chill than normal school,”* while for others *“really annoying and boring”.*

Many young people and children told that they had learned to appreciate going to school, *“whereas always before I’d thought how much nicer it’d be to stay home, but this is really boring in the long run”.* After returning to the classroom environment, it felt like *“it*

used to be nice to get out of school to see a dentist, for example, and now it feels horrible if you have to leave the class”. *“It’s super to have a teacher teaching,”* one of the participants said.

From the point of view of learning, remote school puzzled children and young people: *“haven’t learned almost anything or quite little”*. The challenges of remote school were characterised by the experience that *“I didn’t bother saying I don’t know while on the computer when the teacher asked if anyone had any questions”*. It seemed that the class spirit *“had gone to waste when interaction and activity in meets have decreased to the minimum”*. Also fatigue was an issue, and many had *“super much assignments to do, simply didn’t have the energy to do all that and I was so tired”*. The pupil was *“very much responsible for what you do at each stage”*. Teachers also saw the extent of differences between pupil’s self-regulation skills and support from home: *“Those who get support from home and have good self-regulation skills, they did thrive,”* while others *“fell into a pit”*.

Children and young people reported that the time spent at home with the family has increased significantly during the pandemic. This has brought the family members closer to each other, but it has also resulted in tensions: *“COVID-19 has tensioned the relations, having to be together all the time”*. It seems that minor things lead to conflicts, and both children and adults are high-strung at times.

Many children and young people had their circle of friends narrow down, while some had had their close friend relationships become more close-knit. One of the dialogue participants pondered that they *“only have friends similar to myself, it might be important to also deal with different kinds of people”*. It was also puzzling *“how you can make friends in upper secondary school when you’re alone remotely in a new place”*.

In secondary education, remote studying has made it visible how young people’s self-regulation skills vary and how different the support from home is among them. Some enjoyed studying independently, while others

considered it to be difficult and to erode concentration skill: *“I try to cheat myself into studying”*. In vocational education, studying remotely and implementing remote teaching is particularly challenging due to lacking equipment and training opportunities. It has also been difficult to find places for internships and on-the-job learning: *“No matter how many places I apply to, they won’t take me”*.

In universities, the study years remain bland as social gatherings and forming of relationships remain fragile in remote studies: *“People are just thrown to Zoom, try to cope in there”*. In fact, many of the students who participated in the dialogues described the feelings of disappointment and discouragement associated with the study years and student life. Maintaining a student identity without a link to the practical community of their field is difficult. *“It is about building the capability to trust boldly in those people, open up your thoughts, reflect on your thoughts. That doesn’t work in remote studies”*. Parents and family members were also concerned over the coping and mental health of the students in their family or close circle.

From the point of view of teachers, the transition to the online environment has been *“terribly fast”*. One of the dialogue participants described how *“COVID-19 has been really chaotic to me as a teacher, things change with a short period of notice”*. Technically, remote teaching was quickly adopted and teaching went smoothly, but *“I no longer see the pupils as they aren’t willing to share videos, even online”*. One of the participants described how *“the pupils are just bullet points and the remote connection is a black hole without any grip on the pupils”*. Teachers were worried about pupils’ coping in remote teaching with inadequate language skills, trouble in making friends and the increased anxiety and panic attacks among young people.

The nature of work changed, too: *“previously, teaching has been a collective effort, and now teaching has become a little lonely”*. One teacher deliberated: *“what will be left of me: will artificial intelligence replace the teacher?”*

Another one described that “*maybe one-tenth of what I could have been as a teacher came through*”. There have also been challenges in putting limits to one’s work, because “*even though you do your best, the realities hit*”. Yet, also positive aspects were seen in remote teaching: “*We learned new skills,*” “*I can now teach information retrieval and digital skills*” and “*great new innovation emerges*”.

In the dialogues, parents took their hats off to education professionals for quickly launching remote teaching and its agile implementation. Their understanding of what is done at schools has significantly increased with remote studies. However, many things about remote teaching also puzzled the parents: “*At school, you learn how to be with others or solve social situations, how can you learn it alone in your room when there’s no way to train it*”. The deliberation continued: “*I wonder if something is missing there, how to perceive yourself and the world*”.

Work in change

The transformation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has been fundamental in working life. Even though the public discussion on the transformation of work mainly concerns remote and hybrid work, in the light of the dialogue data, it is above all a question of equality, trust and structures.

The dialogue participants remark that “*there is still a lot of jobs that cannot be done remotely*” and that “*in a way, this possibility to work remotely only concerns a certain part of the population*”. In local work, completely new kinds of risks must be prepared for in a pandemic and new practices and safeguard measures must be adopted. “*When you wear a face mask for 8 hours, it’s quite difficult to get oxygen yourself,*” one of the discussion participants described their day-to-day work. Some felt “*quarantine envy*”, having to continue local work in spite of the situation.

At the same time, some longed back from remote work: “*The grass is always greener on the other side: Some were told they have to stay out of the workplace, others were told that you can’t work remotely*”.

The quick transition to remote work in spring 2020 required strong trust from both employers and employees: “*we rely on trust in the employees doing what is expected of them*”. Many have had their trust in their co-workers and working community strengthen with remote work: “*You can work in many different ways while still carrying responsibility well*”. If working previously meant being present at the workplace, and remote work was separately talked about, now the question emerged “*whether it could be changed and remote work being the default and separately talking about local work*”. It was later estimated that the change that introduced the desired flexibility in ways of working “*would not have taken place without COVID-19*”.

Full remote work “*has been a fundamental change in thinking and doing*”. “*Usually, my job is to bring people together, mobilise them to act, get them moving to do things and now I have to ask everyone to stay at home,*” one of the participants said. The change in work has also revealed the unevenness of working communities’ digital skills. “*Some did not have any skills whatsoever, some were even doing their first days of remote work only now*”. It had also become clear to the participants that “*some love and some hate working remotely*”.

A significant upside of remote work is the reduction of distractions: “*remote work made it possible to work without repeated interruptions, which are common at the office*”. It was also a relief to many dialogue participants that it was not necessary to pay that much attention to looks in remote work: “*with the camera switched off, you can focus on your own comfort and don’t have to think about what you look like*”. Not having to commute has saved a lot of time, money, energy and emissions, thereby facilitating

more carbon-neutral work. For some, working remote freed up time for developing their own work and job description, when customer service tasks, for example, were reduced.

At the same time, remote work is often “a lonely toil”. Teams meeting were matter-of-fact, “and all that humanness and chatter were omitted”. The discussion participants shared the experience that “you have grown accustomed to the situation, but there is a longing for interaction and seeing people, spontaneous chatter and brainstorming”. It was suspected that remote work would have a negative impact on creative thinking and joint development: “Will operating remotely lack the connection and linking of matters to the big picture?” Also, “it’s not that easy to get excited alone”. Getting inspired while looking at a screen alone is more difficult, and “enthusiasm is poorly transmitted remotely”. Also, the lack of informal interaction narrowed down thinking: “I note that thinking becomes more narrow without those coffee table discussions”.

On the other hand, there are also experiences of “cross-sectoral co-operation and doing away with silos seems to be easier these times”. It is also easier to stay in touch internationally, as the new online tools have made the distances shorter. For some, the COVID-19 times have offered a motivation for revising their own work practices: “Even though you are thinking that we’ll just stay on the same path as before, there’s still sort of flexibility found”.

Communality and social relationships at one’s own workplace, however, suffer. During remote work, many shared rituals were no longer there, which made the discussion participants wonder “would anyone notice that I’ve left work if there’s no farewell party?” or “what will it feel like if you retire after a long career and can’t say a proper goodbye?”

People might not have ever met their new co-workers in real life: “It’s quite strange that you work in a team with people you’ve

never seen except on a screen”. Joining a new working community just before or during the pandemic was a peculiar experience to the participants: “I didn’t have time to get to know people. I then sort of ended up in loneliness working from home”. On the other hand, people did not happen to miss the office as they did had not even visited it: “the others are longing for the office, I don’t miss it because I’ve never been there”.

The COVID-19 times are also challenging to managers. Managers were wished to provide support, caring and certainty amidst the uncertainty: “the manager’s genuine and warm caring and hope-building is really important”. At the same time, the managers might have concerns over the coping of both employees and themselves: “Where is the limit of a manager’s coping?” One of the participants thought how “after all these years, I’m a full novice in self-management”.

Both managers and others shared experiences of how Teams meetings take a lion’s share of working hours, and days are long: “When one online meeting ends, another begins”. Taking breaks at work is challenging in the hurry: “The hurry is no longer a sense of hurry, it’s actually busy all the time”. Bodies are also strained due to lacking ergonomics, and “eyes are squinting from staring at the screen”. Even though autumn 2021 offered the relief of the “total period of remote work being a thing of the past,” the transition to hybrid work was also considered to cause challenges to time management and sensible organisation of work.

Remote work also more easily shows unclear expectations, roles and structures, and “at the latest now the situation has shown practices that should be changed”. Many were thinking about “am I already doing enough and is this what is expected of me and have I fulfilled the hopes”. The importance of communication in the working community was emphasised and bottlenecks of information flow emerged: “you need to organise a lot how to get everyone informed”. Also, the

possibility of misinterpretation increases in remote interaction: *“I’m surprised how much you must watch your words”*. Many have felt that messages are readily misinterpreted because *“it’s difficult when you can’t see the body language”*. Conflicts are also more difficult to handle remotely: *“if you notice that something’s wrong, it’s more difficult to solve it than in the normal situation”*.

This was particularly emphasised in contact work. Professionals of social welfare and care work felt that a lot remained unheard and unseen when they dealt with clients through remote connections and the gestures and expressions associated with close encounters remained hidden. All of a sudden, contact work was carried out on the phone, and many were worried *“whether I see and hear people’s concerns when gestures and expressions are completely lacking from the encounter”*. Work also felt the most meaningful in art and culture fields when it was carried out in contact with people. Professionals in the field were annoyed that children and young people were left without art experiences: *“The COVID-19 times are long for children, some children no longer know what a theatre is”*

NGOs and volunteer organisations also feverishly pondered how to build the team spirit and organise peer support and meaningful encounters during the pandemic. When society opened up at times, it was necessary to consider *“should we continue web-driven activities now that live activities increase”* and *“how will employees’ tasks, for example, be distributed so that both virtual and live activities can be offered?”*

Rough times for entrepreneurs

COVID-19 hit many entrepreneurs particularly hard. Entrepreneurs are used to operating in differing situations and also enduring uncertainty, but *“when everything was halted, it felt like the rug was pulled from under your feet completely”*. Many saw all of their assign-

ments stopping, had to lay off their employees, and *“the uncertainty was completely insane”*. The responsibility felt heavy to burden: *“For a year, it’s been a bumpy ride, and it’s been a must to make tough choices along the journey, dismissing people. You saw human pain and distress there, those who remained have needed support and presence”*.

It was impossible to prepare a risk situation like the pandemic, because *“the risks that I thought about back then were completely different from this epidemic. You could only imagine these things in science fiction movies”*. Entrepreneurs were required to be resilient and agile: *“The only thing to do is fight”* and *“must be flexible and make many plans instead of just one”*. However, faith in the realisation of plans was put to a test: *“You can’t trust that the plans made will realise, the uncertainty continues and is long-term”*.

Uncertainty has been felt to be *“frustrating and extremely heavy,”* and, for example, *“at the worst, changes in the restrictions have been read about a few hours before they take place”*. The event business, stricken by COVID-19, wondered *“for how long can we live in suspense – will the event take place?”* Entrepreneurs felt that *“we should kick-down now, but with the other foot on the brake”*. The risk is that all work is carried out many times, and even then, *“the work done might never materialise”*. Also those in the art sector felt that the importance of art and culture are not perceived in society, which is reflected in pushing the field around.

The differing treatment of different sectors and practices relating to the COVID-19 passport felt unjust to entrepreneurs: *“if you go to a shopping centre, nobody will ask for it, but you must have it to enter a restaurant”*. Also the financial support aimed at entrepreneurs gave rise to discussion: *“When you hear that entrepreneurs are given big subsidies in the other Nordic countries and they are supported across the crisis, and with this support policy seen as it’s seen, it gives a strange view of how Finland operates and increases the anxiety and feelings of despair”*.

What is dividing us? – Sense of community and inequality in exceptional times

United by a common threat

In the early moments of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the dialogue participants felt that the common threat united and put everyone on the same footing: *“We’re all equal in front of COVID-19. Nobody is safe from it”*. Facing a common threat, many felt the nation to be united for once: *“It’s really calming that society is so unanimous. I could not have believed that kind of collectivism to be found a few months earlier”*.

There was also a perceived connection beyond one’s local communities, even globally: *“the whole world is facing a common unexpected thing, we’re all in the same boat”*. It was a major historic event, the generational experience of our times: *“Our generation had not previously experienced such difficult times or had to adapt”*. It was pondered in the dialogues whether the children of our time will tell their own children in time: *“When I was a child, we were living in the time of COVID-19”*.

The exceptional times with restrictions brought along an understanding of the day-to-day lives of people who had had to live on the conditions of illness or isolated already before COVID-19. Families that had been in infection isolation already before because of disease or immunosuppressant therapy stated: *“Oh well, we seem to stay home again”*. This time, the difference was that all others were facing the same situation as well.

For a child or a young person, staying out of school due to immunosuppressant

therapy is a tight spot, but when others, too, moved to remote school, *“I didn’t miss as much”*. The exceptional times also provided professionals with an opportunity for identifying with the same situation in which their clients lived their isolated lives.

As one dialogue participant said, *“these COVID-19 times force us to expand our thinking,”* and teach us to *“include others in our own experience, that they are not opposites but in a way would also include that other one”*. Sex worker dialogue participants thought that *“in a way, this situation gives other people a chance to a very limited extent empathise with the stigma and secrecy and ‘sneaking’ that are day-to-day life to us”*.

During a crisis, the interdependence of people is emphasised: *“You won’t make it alone – I need others and some people need me”*. The participants reported how *“team spirit and communality give rise to chain reactions which, in turn, strengthen the team spirit and sense of community”*. Many perceived that *“mutual help between people has increased during the state of emergency”*.

Besides their own close circle, the dialogue participants were particularly worried about children and young people in difficult situations and unsafe homes, development of children’s social relationships in isolation, loneliness, increase in mental health issues and reduction of outpatient services. There was also great concern over the long-term impacts of COVID-19: *“How will ill-being manifest itself in these times and how much of a handicap will we get to work on it when we do?”*

prolonging of the pandemic, lack of organisation or selfishness?” One explanation was found in the resources eaten away by the prolonged state of emergency. When one’s own coping was put to a test, it was necessary to focus on cherishing one’s own well-being: “you sort of protect yourself and your own coping there”. One of the participants described how “one way of controlling the uncertainty is to focus just on your own life and your own immediate circle,” even though it can cause a feeling of guilt at times. “At first, I, too, signed up for volunteer assistant services, all kinds. But then I also noticed that it, too, is tiring at some level,” another one reported.

It can also be due to the fact that even though people were willing to help, it can be difficult to find the right channels for realising it: “*The desire to help does not go away, but activities require organisation*”. The NGOs represented by the discussion participants were in fact actively considering how COVID-19 has impacted people’s experiences of engagement and participation, and how to reach people and keep them involved in these times.

In the same storm, but in different kinds of boats

The metaphor of us all being in the same boat that was frequently repeated in the dialogues touched a nerve in many: “*I’m a bit irritated when people say that we’re in the same boat. In general, generalisations are scary. We are in the same storm, but in different boats. Some have engines, some are rowing*”.

In a state of emergency, structures that create inequality become more visible. “*Some can live safely while others are forced to make dangerous choices,*” one of the participants described the situation. For example, many participants who worked remotely felt that

they were privileged because they were safer from infection than those in local work.

Other privileges also gave rise to discussion: “*I notice that I’m in a privileged position, as I get to meet people on account of my work and can escape the concrete jungle to the countryside, if necessary*”. Some even felt “*guilty of not having any problems during COVID-19 times*”.

The COVID-19 times and living in isolation was perceived very differently by people in different situations in life. In relationships and families involving two cultures, being separated from family members and uncertainty over the impacts of the exceptional times on travel and residence permit decisions was excruciating. Talk about how wonderful it is to wind down with the family and close ones, also felt distant to someone who lives and works alone: “*There can be long periods that I don’t talk to anyone. My experience is therefore very different*”. Another “*is annoyed when someone says that ‘now there’s time’*”. Even though some people’s lives became more relaxed during the COVID-19 times, others only saw increased hurry and associated sense of insufficiency. Immigrants were worried that they would forget the Finnish language after not getting to use it. “*I listened to a lot of Finnish songs, spoke Finnish with the kids*”.

The dialogues increased the participants’ awareness of how “*even though the situation hasn’t affected me a lot, it has affected others*”. Other people’s difficult experiences were of concern: “*I know that I’ll cope, but I’m worried about those in a vulnerable situation in life, because also in exceptional situations like this, some of them remain outside society’s safety nets*”. Some “*have a sceptical feeling of how some have to suffer a lot because of this situation*”. There was a shared thought that “*this year hasn’t been fair to people, some have had unreasonably hard times*”.



Increasing inequality

Many of the dialogue participants were very worried of the times with all their challenges, strengthening the trend of inequality: *“It feels as if those who are the winners also win in this crisis, and those who have been losers will lose even more”*. Another participants worded the same thing slightly differently: *“the well-off fare well, but those who didn’t have it well before, will do even worse”*. Therefore, it seems that *“the experience of the COVID-19 times will divide people in a completely new way, the division lines of society will change”*.

It was feared that the economic impacts of the crisis will tear society apart. *“The impacts of COVID-19 are unequally distributed, and at worst, will increase inequality in Finland and globally,”* one of the participants predicted. There were also concerns of

increasing inequality at the global level: *“Thinking about COVID globally, there’s a lot of people who cannot escape the risks and threats caused by COVID”*. When the COVID-19 vaccinations began, there was also a fear that people across the world will have very different opportunities of getting vaccinated and thereby protecting their health.

Accelerated by COVID-19, digitisation also made it visible that not all people have equal chances of commanding new digital tools: *“What will happen to those who cannot e.g. read or otherwise adopt the skills needed for the digital world?”* Digital services are not yet able to meet the needs of visually impaired people, for example, and physical touch can be the only form of communication for severely disabled or elderly people. Digitisation can result in there being *“two tiers of people, those who know how to use electronic communicators and those who don’t”*. On the other hand, from the point of view of people with impaired mobility, for example, it is digital encounters that facilitate equal opportunities for participation. Regional inequality was also perceived to have increased due to opportunities for remote work and remote participation.

Yet, the dialogue participants were puzzled by the narrowing down of democracy in a situation in which societal discussion increasingly moves to the digital world: *“Who has the competence to take part in joint discussion through digital means. Who gets to make their voices and visions public?”* One of the participants pondered *“that the digitally oriented part of Finns feel that their opportunities for having a say are increased while a big part of the population will find the ways of policy-making increasingly remote and difficult to understand”*.

“Everyone should focus on reducing inequality and taking care of it,” it was said in the discussions. Dialogue participants representing diverse NGOs felt that it is the important role of NGOs to help to even out the increasing gaps between winners and losers.

Where are we heading? – Values and the future

Who am I and how do I want to live?

The state of emergency forced many of the dialogue participants to “*come to a halt around the basics, and that got many people to think about what actually is important in life*”. With a significant health hazard concerning the entire population, the finite nature of life was also perceived by many in a new way. By some, COVID-19 was seen as an “*existential issue*” that reveals how fragile life can be. This understanding gave rise to fundamental deliberations concerning one’s life and life-style: “*Who am I, what do I want? Terribly simple yet simultaneously terribly deep questions*”.

‘Perhaps this is a comprehensive life change,’ one of the discussion participants supposed. Another said that “*I think that the search for a meaning will remain of all this. I will carefully choose what to get involved in. Life will become more meaningful and deep*”. COVID-19 has freed people from the “*ought-to*” mindset, which might “*result in more conscious choices emerging from one’s own will*”. The time of the pandemic has been a unique opportunity for “*internal growth and self-study*” for many, with also more room for spirituality and prayer. Muslims reported that during this time, “*it has been possible to focus more on the spiritual part of Ramadan. We have spent time together and prayed. Thought about things: what are the most important things, clarifying one’s values*”.

Many participants thought that “*I don’t want to go back to the normal I departed from*”. After the experience of not being in a hurry, it would feel “*really bad to go back to the rat race and vicious circle*”. At the same time, it felt crazy that it was only the “*pandemic that made*

us stop”. After life normalised in autumn 2021, however, many of the discussion participants noticed “*that things start to get rolling on you just like in the pre-COVID-19 times*”. One of the participants remembered that “*when we were thinking in the working community that we won’t go back to the rat race, but I feel that this is now even slightly more fierce and we’re taking back some things that were not done during the more intensive COVID-19 times*”.

The performance orientation and rapid tempo of working life got the discussion participants talking: “*I am hoping that society would slow down so that young people wouldn’t burn out*”. Some of the participants were considering or had already made life changes as a result of the pandemic, such as giving up full-time work: “*You get to enjoy life in a different way*”. The COVID-19 times might give rise to “*more conscious choices emerging from one’s own will*”.

Facing fundamental questions might also have made the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of one’s work visible. Many dialogue participants involved in the care, education and social welfare sectors felt that during the pandemic, they had realised “*even better how important a job we’re doing*”. There was an increasing amount of distress and challenges among the client base, and help and support was needed. “*First and foremost, you realise the significance of our work, how much of an impact we really have on people’s lives,*” one of the participants described.

Also civil servants who took part in the dialogues felt that their work has become more visible, “*and perhaps the state’s value and need for it are understood better again*”. Even though good governance is the foundation of everything, “*it might not be noticed in normal times, when it isn’t perceived*”. The civil serv-

ants felt that it was their duty to “*uphold the state in this situation*”. They reported that they were considering “*how to make people’s day-to-day lives easier, how to get the world rolling again*” and “*how to support those who suffer the most from COVID-19*”.

For many participants, the crystallisation of their own values has led to questioning the Western luxurious way of life and continuous consumption: “*Could normal life consist of what is actually essential?*” During the pandemic, it became necessary to give up many forms of consumption that people felt were important to them, and later they might notice that they did not long for them that much after all. “*It’s been a delight to see how little you need and how broad your social capital is,*” one of the participants reported. “*Not having all the opportunities you had before the COVID-19 times, you see that less is more,*” another one said. In fact, one of the lessons learned from the pandemic is “*focusing on the people present at the moment*”. Also, completely ordinary day-to-day life with its joys and griefs felt meaningful: “*That ordinary life is something sacred, valuable and unique*”.

Deliberations concerning lack of hurry, consumption and presence were made concrete on Christmas of the first year of COVID-19. Many regretted not being able to celebrate Christmas as usual, including the intergenerational meals and Christmas mass, “*COVID-19 Christmas is an opportunity to review your Christmas traditions: what in them is valuable and worth preserving and what has been a tradition for the sake of tradition*”.

The dialogue participants have noticed that Christmas gives a new kind of an opportunity for winding down, “*not being in such a hurry all the time*”. The consumption feast becomes more moderate, “*not being able to physically hand presents*”. This provides an opportunity for crystallising the message of Christmas, with “*other values, such as calming down, become more prominent*”. Above all, “*Christmas amidst COVID-19 shows or crystallises what is important about Christmas to us*”.

Towards more humane humanity

According to one dialogue participant, the COVID-19 crisis is “*an opportunity to come closer to oneself, and thereby closer to others*”. “*The nuances of personality have become evident in a different way than in normal times,*” in good and bad. Stopping at oneself and others has in fact sensitivised many participants to consider the different dimensions of humanity. “*Humanity pushes through in various ways,*” one of the participants described this. In exceptional times, “*eye contact is now warmer, warmer for every look*”.

The dialogue participants have noticed how “*humane imperfection and vulnerability are more visible,*” and “*we don’t have to be so strong and can show our vulnerabilities and talk about them*”. As one of the participants put it: “*you get to be more human now and let life show more, both at work and otherwise*”. The participants hoped for the COVID-19 times “*in our culture that emphasised independence and coping alone to result in something that would allow us to open up more to each other, share and reach out to one another*”. Actually, many have found that “*while the COVID-19 crisis has gotten countries to close their borders, people have opened up their hearts*”.

A participant reminded us that “*even short encounters and small acts can be truly meaningful*”. As an example of this, people remembered the offers for help during the first COVID-19 spring: “*really many apartment buildings have had notes from people who are willing to go shopping for elderly neighbours – you’d hope that caring for close people and neighbours would not end*”. Being seen and met seems particularly important in exceptional times.

“*COVID-19 is the last moment that we have to grow as people, towards humanity,*” one dialogue participants summed up.

What did we learn, or did we learn anything?

It was stated in many dialogues that “*a crisis is an opportunity that should not be left unused*”. Some hoped that we would have a memory of a society united for a transient moment. Others thought this would be an opportunity for learning about “*the skewed societal structures that COVID-19 made visible, so that they would not be forgotten after the crisis*”. One participant envisioned that “*here we could have great wisdom to orient ourselves to a different kind of a connection with nature and looking at things with a more appreciating look than so far*”. Another’s dream was “*humility, scaling down, changes: that’s what I’d want us to carry with us from this*”.

“*When all of this is over one day, we should not forget all the good things that this created,*” one dialogue participant summed up the common will. For many, “*the exceptional times have given hope of the possibility of change, that society can change and people can change their actions in a more sustainable direction*”. The dialogues considered a lot of how the lessons learned during the COVID-19 crisis can be recovered. Many thought that “*this COVID-19 is but a dress rehearsal*” and that we need to prepare for shocks and turmoil in the future as well. The world is so far optimised that as the pandemic hit, “*for a moment it felt like the entire world will fall, even though the powers that be were probably aware that this kind of thing would come some day*”.

The basics of the economy were also wondered in the dialogues: “*It is largely based on people consuming and travelling, and is that then sustainable per se? If the whole house of cards collapses in two months, with people spending money only on what they need, is the economy then built on a sustainable foundation?*” Some in fact hoped that the post-COVID-19 world would “*even get a little rid of the harnesses of the economy*” and not “*just rumbling from the point of view*

of the economy, but think that would be important to people, too”.

The post-COVID-19 world will also need social innovation to make us more prepared for future challenges. An idea by a participant was associated with this: “*Organising a COVID-19 world expo, with every country presenting its own insights and what they are going to carry forward from these times*”. One dialogue participant considered how “*complicated problems would require people with very different points of view discuss those matters and that we’d know how to talk about them. Those skills should develop at a staggering rate so that we would be able to solve these problems*”.

It was suspected in the very first dialogues in spring 2020 that “*if this will pass quickly, will we learn anything from it?*” The pandemic did not pass quickly, but also later dialogues pondered that “*in a somewhat twisted way I grieve how short this pestilence was, that if this is it, nobody will learn anything from it, we’ll soon be blinded by the same greed again*”. Many were scared of “*returning to the same old thing, will it again be that sort of a rat race and will we learn anything from this*”.

So, there is a clear message: this is an opportunity for change! One participant summed up the message like this: “*This is the virus speaking, are we listening?*” Especially in the first spring of COVID-19, the tangible-seeming opportunity for change was associated with “*hope that people would engage in self-study and we’d be able to learn from these times and could develop as humanity*”. As the pandemic was prolonged, however, scepticism took over: “*We are not on the path of change, but want to return to the old*”. Some suspected that once the pandemic eases, “*people will go nuts and start to consume even more*”.

The worry of how the COVID-19 times will change us was turned to an even greater worry of “*what if nothing changes after all, what if we can’t learn anything from this?*”

Making the impossible possible

Despite the enthusiasm for change waning as the pandemic was prolonged, many still believed that the pandemic times had shown that also major changes are possible: *“It remained on the top of my mind how changes that had been said to be impossible were achieved overnight”*. The participants had seen that how society could make changes that *“had not been believed to be possible”* when faced with a must.

Many were outright *“amazed how it has been possible to turn the big ship in a very short time and realise things through innovation and technological solutions”*. There is reason to ask: *“Aren’t these times proof of our capability of reacting to global issues?”* The participants pondered what could happen *“if the same resources were allocated to another issue that were spent on COVID?”*

Climate change emerged as an urgent challenge: *“It should be the next thing to be tackled. COVID-19 has shown that there is potential”*. The dialogue participants had jointly witnessed how countries could swiftly react to the global threat caused by the pandemic, *“to make radical decisions and society adapted”*. This also gave hope to think that *“we would be able to take radical steps also when it comes to climate change”*. We would only need *“the same speed and strategic intent”*. On top of it all, it was noted that *“the structural changes aiming to slow down climate change would not restrict day-to-day life and people’s lives as much as the restrictions caused by COVID-19”*.

“These times have proven the extent of things that could be done differently,” one of the participants said. New ways of working have been developed, and new tasks and even jobs have emerged. The participants think that the appreciation of many vocations has increased: *“this has happened in the case of teachers and nurses, among others”*. *“Organisations dare to trust remote work and hybrid models, but also employees will dare to*

more easily align their work and values,” the dialogue forecasted. In business, COVID-19 has accelerated sustainability work: *“all companies will be measured by how they behaved in this situation”*.

Also, changes in their own consumption choices were dialogue topics among the participants: *“my own consumption has changed enormously, how and what I buy”*. *“Local raw materials are assigned a new value, and appreciation for self-made products will also increase,”* a participant forecasted. Another one was *“feeling hopeful that a reduction in the consumption of meat was accelerated by this situation”*. Perhaps, even the whole concept of ‘consumer’ would become a thing of the past: *“Consumption as a word refers to consuming something to the finish”*.

At the same time, the dialogue participants acknowledged that keeping individuals responsible for consumption choices is not enough: *“We are like this, we acknowledge it but close our eyes at a comfortable spot”*. Therefore, *“we must be forced. This is done through taxation, restrictions or systemic change”*.

The future of housing and travel also emerged as topics of dialogue. In the countryside, there was delight at the positive visibility from the COVID-19 crisis and multi-locality facilitated by digitisation: *“the trend of urbanisation and impacts of COVID-19 on it have shown that we are no longer tied to a specific location”*. It will be possible to more freely choose where to live in the future, but the important question is: *“what kinds of services will we consume and will there always need to be major growth centres nearby to be able to enjoy the services?”*

In the exceptional times, people have found short-distance travel: *“I just met someone who had been to Helsinki and it had felt like being abroad”*. Especially during the first summer of COVID-19, people travelled within Finland, and many were thinking about their travel practices: *“I have been to Australia and Japan, but never to Lapland”*.

Short-distance travel was considered attractive, but at the same time, the impacts of reduced travel on countries living on tourism were thought about.

There were lots of questions concerning the future of travel in the dialogue participants' minds. Even though "*unnecessary buzzing has decreased*" during the pandemic, some were thinking about "*will travel explode after COVID-19?*" Or will we be asked one day: "*Is it true that when you were young, did you really travel on aeroplanes?*"

How to build trust? – Encounters in an uncertain world

A continuously moving goal line

People's experiences of safety and trust – and lack thereof – were strongly evident in the dialogues. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the world a more uncertain place to many: *“The future from the point of view of society and the big picture is difficult to assess”*.

Early in the pandemic, many thought that *“where will I set my point of reference for when this pandemic ends”*. This participant goes on: *“getting even seeming order is enormously important, but it's terribly difficult to achieve if you should, for example, set it a year ahead from now that the epidemic will then be over. Even if it would then be certainly over, it would be a shattering thought that it's so far”*.

As an endurance sport, COVID-19 was compared to a marathon. In the first spring of COVID-19, a discussion participant guessed that we are now *“at two or three kilometres, will it be 42 kilometres or double that”*. After the difficult spring, there were high expectations of the summer. *“in the spring, the situation felt like problem-solving and it was a clear package that just required to be handled and it was handled,”* one participant described the situation. The greater was the disappointment when number of infections began to rise again in the autumn after the calmer summer: *“I feel disappointed, tired and sad”*. Trust in the future was put to a test: *“will we survive this situation?”* The uncertainty gave rise to fears: *“Now we're on the alert all the time: I'm just waiting where the next attack will be coming from”*.

During the second year of the pandemic, it seemed that the goal posts are just keeping on moving farther: *“Now that this has lasted*

for so long and you'd previously thought it would take a couple of months, and then that time comes, it's moved a couple of months ahead again”. As one participant put it: *“When you don't know the distance of the journey, it's difficult to prepare your refuelling plan”*. Besides their own coping, many parents were considering how to create safety for their children in the middle of an uncertain world: *“how can you give them the message that no panic, Dad is standing beside them strong as a wall, even though there's all sorts of thoughts crossing your mind all the time”*.

However, more information about the coronavirus is accumulated all the time, and the increase in knowledge eased the worst threat images: *“Early in the year, there was a sense of uncertainty when entering a shop or boarding a train, not knowing how the disease spreads. Now we know more and it's nice when you can take a more relaxed and certain attitude towards where and how to move”*.

Many also stated that *“nothing in life is infinite, this will pass, too”*. The dialogue participants' *“life has brought challenges also before, so now we take the means that we've learned before from that survival toolbox”*. Trust and hope towards the future was particularly gathered from home, families, friends and working communities. For some, *“faith in God provides trust”* and also *“nature brings light and faith in the future”*.

Hope *“lights up a lantern at the end of the COVID tunnel, brighter than before,”* a discussion participant illustrated. One of the sources of hope during the first year of COVID-19 was the COVID-19 vaccine, still under development at the time: *“they are developing vaccines, so if they get it on the market, it might help”*. In relation to humani-

ty's history coloured by pestilence, *"we have quite considerable changes, thinking about the times of the plague, when no vaccines were made in a couple of months"*.

All kinds of putting things to context relieved many people's minds: *"this is a short period in the history of an adult, an even shorter one in the history of a nation"*.

Trust in society and decision-making

"If I had to fall ill somewhere, I'd prefer it to be Finland," a dialogue participant said. Another person, living outside Finland, said that *"it feels good to have a Finnish passport and being able to return there, if necessary"*. Participants who had experienced war or the collapse of a state in their former home countries, said that *"it's much better now, because we're safe at home without fear"*.

"This country has historically always survived bad situations," participants said. Many felt that previous and current *"experiences of crisis unite generations"*. The discussion participants have noticed that *"in countries where power is corrupted, it has impaired people's trust in institutions, unlike in Finland"*.

The Finnish society was described as strong and trustworthy in the dialogues: *"I trust that Finland is a reasonable country and things are taken care of appropriately, unlike in many other countries"*. A discussion participant characterised that *"the Finnish society is flexible and resilient"*. Another said that in spite of shocks, *"at no stage has there been an impression that this will fall completely apart now"*. The COVID-19 pandemic was described as a stress test of the Finnish society, with *"day after day it is surprising that society works, despite everything"*.

When the pandemic began, the government, and Prime Minister Sanna Marin in particular, ended up directly in the eye of the storm. Many remember the government's first briefing: *"I watched it with tears in my*

eyes, it was so well taken care of, and it was a kind of a joint effort and we're all in this together". One of the participants described how *"I felt an enormous relief, affection and gratitude to the government for the Emergency Powers Act"*. Especially in the first spring of COVID-19, the government's clear-cut policy was praised a lot in the dialogues: *"It hasn't been necessary to guess. Clear guidance"*.

"I've thought a lot that if I was forced to make decisions in the face of extreme uncertainty, what would I base my decisions on when I can't know," a dialogue participant pondered. For many, *"it has given trust that leaders have made decisions based on information, and as information has changed, they have also changed the decisions"*. In the dialogues, the rationale of decisions, unveiling the curtains of decision-making, references to international studies and relying on the most recent available information were mentioned as factors that gave rise to trust.

Later, however, moving from *"clear-cut and strong policies"* to *"a time of recommendations"* was confusing to the participants. In the autumn of the first year of COVID-19, in the middle of continuously changing recommendations, some felt that *"this will not become any clearer before we get a vaccine, until then we'll be fooling around with recommendations and restrictions"*. Even after the vaccinations began, communications by the authorities have seemed conflicting at times, and especially vaccinations of children puzzle some of the participants.

As the pandemic progressed, the dialogues in fact became continuously more pluralistic and critical, especially in relation to COVID-19 restrictions. Some longed for listening to a more extensive pool of specialists and increased transparency of the backgrounds and rationale of decisions. Even though the restrictions were considered *"quite unavoidable,"* also the economic aspect with the loss of jobs and business puzzled many: *"If I'm self-employed and the*

government makes decisions that prevent me from working, of course it prevents trust”.

“The cost incurred by the young, families, human relationships, how all of this is crumbling around COVID-19 when risk groups are protected” also felt unreasonable. It was also a concern that *“how high will be the price to pay in other healthcare when only COVID-19 has been treated?”* Some of the participants were thinking about public healthcare in Finland: *“Hasn’t gone in a good direction recently”.*

As a question of principle, the restriction of individual freedoms gave rise to debate: *“it has been interesting to see later how the restrictions were met so favourably without questioning human rights”.* According to some participants, *“we in Finland have very readily allowed the restriction of our rights”.* On the other hand, *“it’s been interesting to see how even ultra-liberal people who have opposed a strong public sector and emphasised individual wisdom and liberty have been demanding stronger restrictions and control from the public sector”.*

Especially the restrictions on those belonging to risk groups on account of their age during the first year of the pandemic gave rise to very conflicting emotions. Some people circumvented elderly people out of respect, but some were offended by that: *“I was very offended to be gone around, because I don’t feel old”.* For some, there was *“a primitive reaction, who gets to order me, I am still capable of deciding for myself whether I’ll go out”.* Many of the dialogue participants aged over 70 said that they understood the restrictions and were coping with them, *“but emotionally, a surprisingly fierce feeling,”* especially since *“many seniors are more fit than young people”.* One participant said that *“it irritates me to be considered fragile. It was the key word to why we were supposed to stay out, locked up”.* Another described the restrictions as an *“an easy solution for a young government, let the pensioners stay home”.* Others have felt in day-to-day interactions that *“they’re looking at you like there’s*

a pensioner aged over 70 and some have even said that it’s the wrong time, isn’t the pensioners’ time at other hours”.

Information and disinformation

“Reading the Helsingin Sanomat newspaper and listening to the news has begun to make me anxious for the first time in my life. The polarisation on social media and Facebook is distressing. On any side, there’s some truth and some false,” one of the dialogue participants described their mood during the second spring of the pandemic. Many other dialogues participants have also experienced fatigue with the flood of information and confusion amidst the conflicting news: *“in my prior life, I have tried to follow media, but the last 18 months I’ve been trying to avoid it”.* Some of the participants felt that a new crisis or conflict was always found even from glimpses of hope: *“How can the papers always turn it negative, wanting to mill in ill-being.”*

The role of media as a provider of information puzzled many: *“How can we guarantee that the municipality’s residents can get correct, reliable and up-to-date information when the media is simultaneously storming with sensational headlines and content?”* The weakening of the financial position of local media can *“do significant damage to the flow of information and making it understandable”.* Some media bait clicks at the expense of truth and *“focus more on money than the value of the information.”*

The importance of information and the ability to analyse it is emphasised in our time. Others were calmed down by the high amount of reliable information available: *“I believe that researchers are doing their job and we get the most recent information”.* To some people’s minds, the COVID-19 crisis had even strengthened the transition from populist thinking to *“believing in what scientists say and do”.* A dialogue participant

said that *“with this being so unknown, where this will lead, what is coming, it is easier to trust the guidelines and thereby you wish that things would proceed that way and things would be done the right way”*.

At the same time, the pandemic has also strengthened the spreading of false information. The participants were concerned how *“there’s a lot of bogus information and these false news and others, with an increasing share of people believing in them”*. Others were amazed at the *“distrust with the authorities and healthcare professionals”* or asked *“how some can have so little trust in politicians and how can they get carried away with conspiracy theories”*. *“People no longer believe what the authorities say, they’d rather believe an unknown private individual online,”* a participant described the situation. The dialogue participants were concerned and afraid *“when some people say outright that they don’t believe in COVID-19, that it’s an invention of the powers that be”*. Even though *“people should be allowed to have a say quite far,”* some participants felt that spreading misinformation was outright criminal.

“Where is this world headed if every individual has the right to decide what they want to believe in?” a participant asked.

Do we trust each other?

It is also perceived in the dialogues how people expect and wish fellow people to behave in a pandemic. Many wished that fellow people would take the recommendations seriously, keep a safety distance and use face masks after the entry into force of the face mask recommendation. Carelessness in these matters irritated, and some participants had also seen conflicts emerge in their immediate circle over different attitudes to the recommendations.

Some of the dialogue participants were frustrated due to *“knowing that all this could end so much faster if people only used those bloody face masks”*. It is using or not using a

face mask that emerged as an example of a small act that can be done as a sign of taking others into consideration and taking responsibility: *“Of course I support it, thinking about yourself and standing up for yourself, but then again, if you can do a small good deed and wear a face mask and thereby help a heap of other people, I think it’s clearly an easy decision”*. Compared to the early days of the pandemic, when using a face mask attracted attention - *“I felt stupid wearing a face mask when others didn’t have it”* – the situation turned around following the recommendation to use a face mask.

One participant wished that *“people would take responsibility for this society together instead of only looking at it from their own point of view”*. Another had begun to ponder that *“I have strong faith in the government and city, I trust the services, but now I’m starting to think that not everyone is behaving in a way worthy of trust”*. In particular, the dialogue participants were concerned by *“the group of people who mutiny and intentionally act contrary to the recommendations in a matter as serious as this, out of sheer joy of breaking the rules”*. Other people’s discretion was assessed, and one of the participants thought that *“is it the sort of thoughtlessness, that if you feel that the risk doesn’t concern you, or there are no people in risk groups among your close ones, or you have no experience of COVID-19 if you’re in a really secure and privileged position, that then you don’t have to care about anybody else”*.

Some had witnessed how the restrictions also brought up *“comical aspects”* in us. Some people had become *“COVID police”*, spying on others’ doings up to a level of being hysteric: *“a pensioner yelled in a queue in a shop to keep the distance”*. In particular, *“you pay attention to the behaviour of young people”*. A person who had walked around town in student overalls *“was looked at in a menacing way, a very cold look”*. One participant was afraid that *“since I don’t wear a face mask, will somebody jump me because of it”*.

“We have terribly much of blaming people for their different choices,” the participants had noticed. One participant pondered how *“all people are in different situations in life, and we don’t know people’s backgrounds, and therefore I try to avoid judging others for their choices”*. Another one thought that it would be important to acknowledge that *“every one of us stretches the limits of the restrictions in the matters that are the most important to them, and for somebody else the most important things are other than for me”*.

Vaccinations draw a new dividing line

In autumn 2021, a new dividing line has been drawn between people, determined by the attitude to COVID-19 vaccinations. The dialogue participants’ own communities could involve both *“people who don’t have vaccines yet and also people who are very much scared of getting an infection”*. The poor vaccination coverage in some groups was of concern, *“and not everyone yet dares to get involved in non-remote activities”*. Many were afraid that *“it will be necessary to take a step backward”* in opening up society if vaccination coverage does not increase sufficiently.

The participants have noticed that both globally and in their own communities, it became apparent that there was a *“division into two groups with regard to vaccines”*. Vaccination-related matters *“are really difficult to talk about across those steep dividing lines”*. There was a wish to understand those who had different ideas, but it seemed difficult: *“I’d like to talk with them, but I don’t know where that would be possible”*. At the same time, it has been noticed that in public debate *“criticism of vaccines is stigmatised as some sort of bad citizenship”* and the unvaccinated are accused and marginalised. *“I believe that there is probably also engineered campaigning behind vaccine criticism, but also people’s different stories that*

should be heard,” one of the discussion participants considered.

The dialogue participants thought that safety is a fundamental need of all people, but the means to achieve it differ: *“probably both those who have taken the vaccine and those who haven’t, they both want to be safe”*. Disinformation and the views of vaccine critics were seen as frustrating, but at the same time, people’s own identity as a broad-minded person was put to a test: *“I too have a conflict inside of me, having always thought of myself as an empathetic and thoughtful person”*. According to the participants, *“it is important once in a while to stop and consider your own emotions and continue the discussion on them and listen to other people’s experiences and not make assumptions of what is underlying people’s actions”*.

“I’m not that worried about the coronavirus, but this atmosphere,” one participant stated. Many thought that *“trust in society and our immediate circles is something that we can and I can bring to the world”*. The wish was that *“we’d primarily think more good about each other”*. Trust in fellow people is also seen more extensively in society: *“when people trust each other in society, it is also reflected in the trust in institutions”*.

One dialogue participant reminded others that *“society is a group of people from which nobody can be kicked out”*. They continued: *“In some way, you just have to keep everyone along and then dialogue is pretty much the only alternative”*.

Dialogue builds bridges between people

Engaging in dialogue was also talked about in the dialogues. As equal discussions that aimed at understanding, Lockdown Dialogues succeeded in building trust and bridges between people: *“An enormous sense of trust emerged in the discussion”*. One of the participants stated that *“it was wonderful to*

talk and listen to smart people, maybe my faith in people will return one day". Dialogue was described as a window to another person's life, and opening this window and opening one's bubble opened up opportunities for a sense of connection with other people: "You are not alone".

It was wondered in the dialogues how a confidential relationship can emerge between strangers in a short time: "*You meet a person for the first time and all of a sudden you're quite close to them*". One of the participants described how people are often categorised and mental images are formed of them on lightweight grounds. However, the dialogue made it across stereotypes: "*it is moving to see how I can look another person in the eyes and see them as open and willing to listen*". A participant worded how "*the enormous depth of interaction and mutual support relayed in the discussion, the empowerment feels so tangible*".

"*It is interesting to note that you can both agree and disagree with someone and it still works quite fine,*" one of the participants described their experience of the dialogue. The participants felt it important to discuss current challenges in peace and learn to understand the different experiences and views of others: "*the bubble broke and you heard experiences that differed very much from your own*". One participant said how hearing others' emotions "*nicely supplemented my own thinking and added perspective also to my own thoughts and emotions*". The understanding of the challenges of the exceptional times, others and oneself was strengthened through the dialogue: "*Wisdom lives between people*".

In many participants' day-to-day lives, "*there are very few possibilities of sitting down for two hours and talking about how you're doing*". Therefore, it is "*meaningful to share your own experiences in this kind of a confidential atmosphere and hear about others' experiences and take your time for that*". The participants felt that dialogue "*makes it possible to hear others' thoughts and reflect on*

your own thoughts". One of the participants described "*how much good this kind of a listening discussion does for your own mind and learning*". Another one crystallised that "*the COVID times have a major impact on coping, so this kind of a discussion and talking about situations is essential*".

It is in this time that encounters and sharing of experiences seemed particularly important: "*we also need other things than putting out fires, working communities and certainly other places, too, have a need for deliberating and discussing the exceptional times more extensively and deeply and asking people how they have specifically impacted them*". One participant stated that "*this is actually the first time in a very long time that I've stopped to ponder what has happened during COVID-19*".

Participating in dialogue strengthened the participants' experience that different people in different situations in life experience the exceptional times in very different ways: "*Even though the situation has not affected me much, it has others*". "*The dialogue increased my understanding of other people's situations,*" one participant said, "*I feel that I'm understanding myself and others better on the basis of the dialogue*". One participant summed up the message like this: "*The COVID-19 crisis touches on people in different ways. It is important to get everyone's voice heard when discussing the impacts of the crisis and its solutions*". There was a desire for more opportunities for dialogue, especially with people of different generations and different backgrounds.

"*People have a need for sharing their own experiences and hearing about others' experiences, and something good can emerge from these dialogues. Your own experiences can be very important to someone, and even to the entire community,*" one participant said. The feeling of "*having something to give based on your own experience*" was important to many. One child taking part in a dialogue summed it up: "*I think that children should be asked more about what we're thinking*".

It was important for the participants to know that the matters that emerged in the dialogues were brought up to decision-makers' attention: *"that all these important considerations are included in the summary sent all the way to the Ministry"*. The organisers notice that *"the participants were clearly motivated by getting their own experiences transmitted all the way there"*. One organiser described that *"the gratitude that the participants bring up when their voices are heard is moving"*. Another stated that *"bringing up the day-to-day experiences of common people and offering a line of communication is very important to everyone's mental well-being in this kind of an exceptional situation"*. Decision-makers were also wished to be involved in the dialogues: *"So*

that they'll hear what people think. That they have rules and regulations to follow, but everyone should come and listen to what we are thinking".

Dialogues also strengthened the participants' trust in the future: *"The discussion has given information or insight into communality and a shared concern, feeling and strategic intent"*. Dialogues that also included quite grim experiences often ended in an experience of winding down and hopefulness: *"Sharing things gives rise to insights and points of views and helps to create hope and trust in us coping and surviving"*.

"Dialogue is important, it has to be continued and expanded!" the participants to one dialogue summed up.



2 Model for national dialogue

Understanding and participation at the core

The model for national dialogue (The Finnish National Dialogues) is a new way for implementing societal dialogue as co-operation between people, organisations and the authorities based on the operating methods created in the Lockdown Dialogues. National dialogues provide means of discussing things important to people and communities in a way that enhances participation and creates a pluralistic understanding of people's experiences and the challenges at hand.

The concept of National Dialogue is not new, but it is given different meanings in different places and at different times. The Berghof Foundation, a non-governmental organisation specialising in conflict resolution and peace-building, defines national dialogue as a nationally led political process that aims to build societal consensus and better decision-making in diverse transition, transformation and conflict situations through dialogue and means of strengthening trust. (Berghof Foundation 2017. National Dialogue Handbook – A Guide for Practitioners, <https://berghof-foundation.org/library/national-dialogue-handbook-a-guide-for-practitioners>.)

The Finnish National Dialogues model, however, is not a political process, and it does not aim at a consensus or consensus-driven decision-making. Instead, the aim

is societal dialogue that enhances participation, sense of belonging and the ability of the Finnish society to change in diverse ecological, economic and social challenges. In fact, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recommends that national dialogue based on the Lockdown Dialogues model would take root in our society as a nationwide practice that maintains trust, democracy and social peace. (OECD: Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Finland (2021), <https://www.oecd.org/publications/drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-in-finland-52600c9e-en.htm>)

The first Finnish implementation of national dialogue, the Lockdown Dialogues, took place as a nationwide series of dialogues. In addition to the national scale, the model can be scaled both ways: it can be targeted locally or within a specific sector or industry or expanded into an international series of discussions. The prerequisites for the application and scaling of the model are described in more detail at the end of this part. It describes the main features of the model of national dialogue: who are the key parties in the model, what kind of work is required for managing and organising the big picture, how the dialogues are organised and the organisers inspired and supported, which themes and forms can the dialogue get, how will the outputs of the dialogues be recorded and analysed, and where and how they can be used.

Organising dialogues

Launch of the series of dialogues

The decision to launch the Lockdown Dialogues series was made quickly amidst the uncertainty in spring 2020. The Dialogue Academy, an institution that promotes and mentors in dialogue, presented the idea of a series of remote dialogues for open governance developers recently trained in the Timeout method at the Ministry of Finance governance policy unit. Timeout is a dialogue method developed at Sitra from 2016 to 2019 to launch and carry out constructive discussion. A Timeout dialogue aims at a better understanding of the topic of the discussion, other people and oneself through listening and equal discussion. On the brink of the pandemic, Timeout had already established its position as part of societal discussion in Finland, but it now had to be adapted to two new challenges: a national crisis and encounters through remote connections.

The Dialogue Academy had developed tools for dialogue in acute crises, which

could be used in this situation. Experience had already also been accumulated from the nationwide Timeout Day in January 2019, allowing anyone to organise or take part in a discussion on climate change. The first Timeout Week was organised in December the same year. Thanks to this experience and co-operation, a preliminary network already existed with tested tools for reaching out to and inducting discussion organisers and participants.

The proposal for a series of discussions was met with joy at the Ministry of Finance, because it supported the Ministry's desire to strengthen trust between different parties to society through dialogue. A steering group was established for the Lockdown Dialogues, with experts from Dialogue Academy, the Timeout Foundation, Ministry of Justice, Sitra, Ministry of Finance and later also the Prime Minister's Office as equal members. The steering group placed its trust in open and equal co-operation, which was also characteristic of the subsequent implementation of the Lockdown Dialogues.

WHAT IS TIMEOUT?

Timeout is a model for engaging in constructive discussions, based on dialogue and equal encounters. It includes tools for initiating and carrying out constructive discussions

The Timeout dialogues bring different kinds of people together with a low threshold. It only requires time, an open mind and the will to meet and listen to others. Timeout is used in schools, workplaces, politics and media to produce new information and ideas, expand understanding and strengthen participation and sense of community.

Read more: www.timeoutdialogue.fi

“There was a low threshold of participation here. What I like the most is that it is not tied to geography in any way”.

Participant

Digital leap of dialogue

In Finland, web connections are available to everyone and the population has internationally speaking good digital skills. Therefore, the transition to remote studying and remote work was relatively smooth as the pandemic accelerated, even though there was a massive amount of new things to learn. The Lockdown Dialogues also had to be primarily carried out as remote dialogues, as meeting face-to-face would be impossible in this situation, and it was only in autumn 2021 that the discussions could also be organised as local dialogues.

Many were worried about what remote connections would do to dialogues, which are based on encounter and physical presence. However, COVID-19 did not kill dialogue; instead, it introduced many who could not have taken part without remote connections to it. People who would not have been able to arrive on site for local dialogue due to geographical distances, traffic connections or impaired mobility took part in remote dialogues. Some people found it easier to take part remotely from their own homes because of social pressures or anxiety. There were also people who would not need to separately arrange for a babysitter to leave home, and people who lived in countries other than Finland but still wanted to take part in the discussion.

“Would I have joined a similar event in a cafe, would I have travelled to Helsinki because of this, not necessarily. It was easy this way, online”.

Participant

Participants of different ages and backgrounds took over remote dialogues using ordinary means. It required a working network connection and a device for joining the discussion platform. The majority of the dialogues were organised on Zoom, Meet, Teams, Skype or as group calls.

Even though the push to remote dialogues was forced by the pandemic, remote dialogue is not a back-up version of “real” dialogue. Remote dialogue is an important and accessible way among others to realise meaningful discussion. Encounter is possible online just as well as face-to-face, when attention is paid to the quality of interaction, creation of trust and eliminating factors that interfere with concentration.

The isolation from other people caused by the restrictions on public gatherings further emphasised the importance of encounters in remote dialogues. Dialogical discussion was considered to be nourishing in a way that differed from the “Teams pipeline” that has become all too familiar with the prolonging of the pandemic. Naturally, remote dialogue also involves challenges, the most significant of which is probably sensing others’ body language and emotions through the web. Online, we also act in a somewhat more premeditated way and avoid talking on top of each other, for example, but also a sort of spontaneity is eliminated at the same time. It may also be harder to stay alert during an online discussion.

“Even though the day was busy otherwise, during this discussion, we were present in the moment and listened to each other”.

Participant to a working community dialogue

Target groups and key parties

Dialogue participants

Everyone is invited to join the national dialogue! People of different ages and backgrounds, in different situations in life across the country and the world, of varied talents and meeting different challenges in their lives, and people representing different occupational groups and industries are wished to join the discussions. It is particularly important to also involve people living in vulnerable situations and those whose voice is not usually heard in societal discussions. In Lockdown Dialogues, these groups were particularly reached through NGOs that actively organised discussions, doing a lot of work to reach discussion participants and invite them.

More tips for defining the participants:

<https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/defining-the-participants/>

Dialogue organisers

The dialogue organisers can be NGOs, cities and municipalities, government organisations, businesses, educational organisations, religious and spiritual associations, foundations, project parties and common private individuals. All of these parties were represented in the Lockdown Dialogues, and the NGO sector in particular was active in organising discussions. Some of the organisers took part in all rounds of discussions, some several times and others on a one-off basis. The organisers invited the participants, steered and recorded the discussions and submitted the discussion notes for the discussion summary. The discussion facilitators

included both trained Timeout instructors and experienced dialogue professionals and people facilitating their first discussions. All of the organisers and facilitators were given a concise induction and written instructions supporting the organisation of their own discussions.

“You don’t have to be an organisation to act as an organiser”.

A private individual who organised a discussion

Inviting organisations and inspiring and committing them to activities is a critical factor to the success of a series of discussions. This cannot be done through mass communication only; it required targeted and personal contacts and telling them what it means and gives to participate from the discussion organiser’s point of view. In Lockdown Dialogues, the organisers were motivated by the freedom of adjusting the topic of the discussion to the needs of their target groups, opportunity to use the outcomes of the discussion in their own operations, information about other parties involved and forwarding the discussion summaries to the government. In national dialogues, it will be necessary to pay particular attention to building the organiser network and how to commit the new discussion organisers coming along to the activities

Operational core team

The core team plans and coordinates the series of discussions, negotiates on the resources and is responsible for the arrangements, such as communications, inviting and inspiring organisers, induction, materials, compiling registrations and discussion records, web pages and disseminating and communicating the discussion summaries. A key part of the team’s activities is equal

co-operation in which no party alone determines the procedures or sets the agenda for the discussions. It is also important to acknowledge that in the extensive whole comprised of tens or even hundreds of parties, there is a lot of operational work to be done and sufficient resources must be allocated to it.

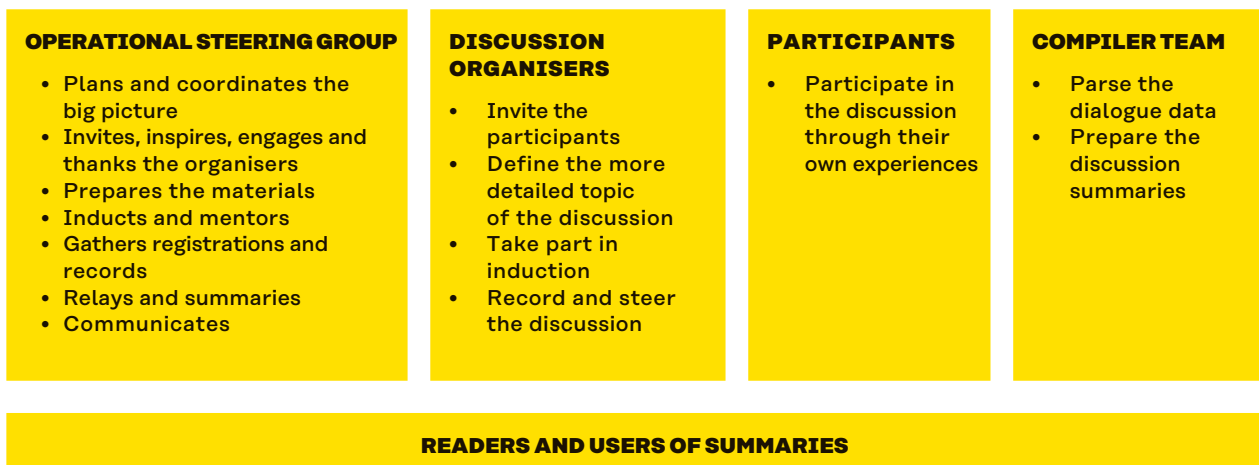
In the Lockdown Dialogues, the work of the core team was divided between the steering group and the operational team. The steering group's equal members were Dialogue Academy, the Timeout Foundation, Ministry of Justice, Sitra, Ministry of Finance and later also the Prime Minister's Office. The steering group planned and built the overall concept for the Lockdown Dialogues using the dialogue expertise of Dialogue Academy and the Timeout Foundation, negotiated on the resources, coordinated the progress of the series of discussions and was responsible for disseminating and communicating the discussion summaries. The operational team was comprised of experts from Dialogue Academy and the Timeout Foundation, who were responsible for the considerable practical work associated with the series of discussions. In practice, the steering and operational work was in part carried out by the same persons. The model for national

dialogue can move to a simpler structure in which all parties that steer operations are also involved in operational work, allowing for a more even distribution of work and resources and all participants retaining a feel of the discussion organisers and participants.

Data users

The outcomes relayed by the summaries and the understanding created can be used by the discussion participants and organisers in their operations, other organisations and common people, the authorities and government as well as media. The use of the outcomes of dialogue in the organisers' own operations and government is described more later in this chapter.

Figure 4. Key parties to the National Dialogue model





**ANNA SIDOROVA,
PROGRAMME DIRECTOR,
CULTURA FOUNDATION**

EXPERIENCE STORY

We were invited to the Lockdown Dialogues by Dialogue Academy, who enquired whether we would like to take part in a contemplated series of discussions. We had learned about the Timeout method already the year it was published. At Cultura Foundation, we work with Russian-speakers living in Finland, and Timeout provides so much to them as well as other immigrants. It facilitates equal discussion, which is desired by many.

We were immediately ready to try out remote dialogue, as we had just been considering ways to get a grasp of the Russian-speaking population's experiences, questions and condition in the exceptional times. For the first dialogue, I invited friends and people I know to discuss and experiment, and encouraged by the positive experience, I proposed to those involved that we could organise more dialogues together. We invited Russian speakers from other cities and around the world to take part in them, as well as Finns who speak Russian as their native language.

The dialogues created a sense of community and engagement. Many of the participants had felt that they were alone with their worries, but the feeling of being in the same boat emerged from sharing the experiences. This also applied to society more generally: at least, it was felt that we are all equal as Finns encountering the crisis. In the dialogues, the exceptional times were also compared to moving to a new country, with life on the whole changing and practices that used to be obvious no longer working. This comparison helped the participants born in Finland to better understand immigrants and the major change that they had encountered in their lives. It was very important to the partici-

pants as well as us as the dialogue organisers that the discussions were recorded and translated; they became part of the Lockdown Dialogue summaries and thereby our voice was heard. The participants felt that they usually had few means for having a say, and they appreciated the chance of being heard and having an impact through their own experiences.

We also contemplated other ways of studying the rich and multi-faceted data at hand. Cultura Foundation's CulturaFest festival was organised as a digital event in 2020, and this resulted in the idea for an art project in which the St. Petersburg-based artist Natalia Yamschikova interpreted the data in the form of a cartoon (https://culturafest.fi/emergency_fi/). The background colour of the cartoon is yellow, which symbolises uncertainty in the Russian culture. The pictures show diverse forms changing their shape in an uncertain world, just like when people search for themselves and their form in a new kind of an environment during crisis times or when immigrating.

Previously, we thought that you always have to travel to engage in discussion. The emergency opened our eyes to the fact that we can also invite people from different cities and countries to remote dialogues. I am also pleased that the Lockdown Dialogues proved already during their first spring that good online interaction is possible when attention is consciously paid to the rules and spirit of discussion.

Dialogue orientation is continuously strengthening in our activities, and we are now training people who took part in our very first Lockdown Dialogue as Timeout facilitators.

Number, topic and form of dialogues

In Lockdown Dialogues, the starting point of discussions was to increase the understanding of what it is like to live in the middle of a pandemic, how the state of emergency has impacted us and what will we face in the future. When the Lockdown Dialogues started in spring 2020, it was not known how long the pandemic and life in an emergency will continue, so the scope of the series of discussions could not be decided in advance, either. Ultimately, discussions were organised during 13 rounds of dialogues from April 2020 to December 2021, first slightly more frequently and with longer intervals towards the end. The duration of the series of dialogues and number and frequency of discussions is therefore planned flexibly based on the need and situation.

It is a good idea for the series of dialogues to have a shared main theme that the organisers will then flexibly adapt, word and refine in a way that addresses their target groups. Lockdown Dialogues kicked off with a shared theme in 2020, which the organisers were encouraged to adapt to be meaningful to their own target groups:

Life in Finland during a state of emergency which, as the pandemic continued, changed into Life during COVID-19 and in the future

and in autumn 2021 into the question

How has the long state of emergency impacted us and what are we facing now?

Discussion topics adapted to the target groups included, among others:

What is life in Finland like during the state of emergency as an elderly person? As a schoolchild? As a student? As a parent? As an unemployed person? As a professional in a specific field? As an immigrant? As an entrepreneur? As a rehabilitee? As a civil servant?

Two key questions of the dialogues shared by everyone were:

*What are you worried about right now?
What gives hope and trust this very moment?*

Some rounds of dialogues focused particularly on aspects associated with work, sense of community, justice, ecological sustainability and future.

The Timeout model is recommended as the method of implementing the discussions in the model for national dialogue. Timeout is a dialogue method for launching and facilitating constructive discussions, and its tools are freely available to anyone (<https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi>).

GROUND RULES OF A CONSTRUCTIVE DISCUSSION – TIMEOUT

1. **Listen** to the others, do not interrupt or start additional discussions.
2. **Join** others' talks and use colloquial language.
3. **Tell** about your own experience.
4. **Address** the others directly and ask them about their views.
5. **Be present and respect** others and the confidentiality of the discussion.
6. **Search and build.** Work on the emerging conflicts boldly and look for what remains hidden.

www.timeoutdialogue.fi

“// The participants talked actively and personally, listened to one another and joined each other’s talks in a very natural and appreciating way. They also asked each other questions and brought new themes to the discussions”.

Dialogue organiser

The ground rules of a constructive discussion are followed in Timeout dialogues, guaranteeing the equality of the discussion. Timeout dialogue always have a facilitator who takes care of compliance with the rules, progress of the discussion and compilation of the insights.

The dialogue organiser can also use another dialogue method that is suitable or familiar to themselves and their target group. The dialogues can be realised as face-to-face or remote discussions, depending on the situation. Combining local and remote participation in the same discussion (or “*hybrid discussion*”) is difficult from the facilitator’s point of view, so its use should be carefully considered.

The dates of the dialogues should be clear well in advance so that the organisers have enough time to learn about dialogue and reach out to the potential participants. For local discussions, book a suitable venue and, if necessary, some refreshments. The organiser of a remote dialogue, on the other hand, should try out the technology and online platform to be used in advance to avoid surprises in the actual discussion. If necessary, it is a good idea to also offer the participants this opportunity.

Inviting the participants

A series of dialogues lays down the framework for the topic and time of the discussion. However, the dialogue organiser decides the more detailed topic and point of

“// Make sure that the network connection works”.

Discussion organiser

More tips for wording the rules:

<https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/ground-rules-for-a-constructive-discussion/>

More tips for choosing a suitable venue:

<https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/venue-and-practical-matters/>

view of their discussion, its method of implementation and exact date, and invites the participants. The target group of the dialogue is comprised of the people with whom you want to deepen the understanding of the topic of discussion. The participants to an individual dialogue can include people who are very much different and do not know each other, or it can be a work team or a hobby group. A single remote dialogue usually has three to ten participants, in local dialogue, the group can also be a little bigger.

A good invitation to dialogue is clear-cut, understandable and inspires discussion. You can ask questions that tune in to the topic already in the invitation, getting the participants interested and pondering their own relationship to the topic. It is also important to communicate in the invitation that it is the experiences of the invitation recipient that are important to building a shared understanding. The invitation should also mention the summary to be prepared of the dialogues and whether the understanding resulting from the discussion will be used in other contexts (such as development work, decision-making or research). Using the outputs of the dialogues as extensively as possible is naturally recommended!

The organisers themselves best know the channels for optimally reaching their target groups. A personal invitation is often the most effective, but it is harder to reach strangers or people beyond your own circle with it. In Lockdown Dialogues, discussions open to everyone were added to an event page where they were easy to find.

Registrations can be accepted through a registration link, by e-mail, by telephone or in person. It is a good idea to have a deadline for registrations so that the organiser can invite additional participants, if necessary. The registered persons are sent a confirmation message and instructions for joining the dialogue. Even if the participants were known to the organiser, such as members of the same working community, attention should still be paid to invites and instructions. Even the mood conveyed by the invitation can attune the recipient in to equal and listening discussion.

More tips for inviting:

<https://www.timeoutdialogue.fi/tool/inviting-participants/>

Induction in dialogue

A key part of the model for national dialogue is the induction in dialogue offered to discussion organisers and facilitators. In Lockdown Dialogues, the discussion organisers were offered a joint induction realised by the Timeout Foundation and Dialogue Academy and small group mentoring in facilitating dialogue provided by Dialogue Academy. All

support and induction were free of charge to the discussion organisers.

A joint induction (2 hours) was provided to all organisers of each round of dialogues, after which the organisers had an opportunity for custom mentoring in small groups. The practical orientation of the induction and mentoring was praised by the organisers. In addition to this, the organisers received written support materials for organising dialogues.

The written support materials for Lockdown Dialogues included:

- organiser's information package with instructions and materials.
- a dialogue invitation template with texts and a proposal for how to invite people and how to schedule the discussion.
- The Timeout dialogue template, or dialogue script, which includes the guidance required for facilitating the discussion and example wordings for opening the dialogue, rules, attuning in, deepening, gathering insights and ending the discussion.
- there was also a lot of more advanced materials available, such as Timeout discussion cards supporting the facilitation of a discussion, other Timeout tools, ground rules for a constructive discussion and tips related to the remote facilitation of dialogue.

“The instructions are good and can be safely relied on. The structure serves the progress of the dialogue”.

Discussion organiser

“The structure and method lifted the discussion to a new level”.

Participant to a working community dialogue

TIMEOUT DIALOGUE TEMPLATE

1. Welcome, introduction
2. Ground rules for a constructive discussion
3. Opening that tunes in to the topic
4. Pair discussion or personal deliberation
5. Joint discussion
6. Deepening the dialogue
7. (Pair discussion or personal deliberation)
8. (Joint discussion)
9. Writing down one's own insights
10. Sharing one's own insights with others
11. How to move forward?
12. Thanks

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TEEMU MIETTINEN
HUMAN RESOURCES AND FINANCE
MANAGER AT TOIMIHENKILÖLIITTO
ERTO RY

EXPERIENCE STORY

I attended the Timeout facilitator training in 2019 and considered the role of dialogue in the operations of trade unions at that time. I intended to launch dialogues for the members and personnel of our union during 2020, but my plans were stopped by COVID-19. It was just then that the invitation to Lockdown Dialogues came to me by e-mail. I joined to organise dialogues of themes relating to working life in a state of emergency for our members.

First, I took part in the Lockdown Dialogues induction and thereby aimed to outline what dialogues could offer our members and what is expected of me as the discussion facilitator. I got to hear what kind of dialogues the others were planning, and my own dialogues also began to take shape. I like to get some structure to my doings, and it was offered by the instructions given in the induction, the dialogue template and example wordings. I tried to follow the template and plan the schedule as accurately as possible. A clear structure supports you when moving in an area that is something new to you.

I facilitated my first dialogue at home, sitting by my coffee table. The dialogue participants were our members, and the topics of the discussion were layoffs and the emotions they brought up. I expected to get a few members to attend and knew that the topic would touch the discussion participants, as many were under the threat of a layoff for the first time in their lives. I already had some idea of the Timeout method and I have discussion-oriented attitude to life. Yet it felt like I was going towards my first dialogue with somewhat flimsy steps, and only afterwards did I notice that I had been sitting with a bad posture for the full two hours because of nervousness.

Facilitating the dialogue was a rich experience and the discussion was full of emotion. People were crying and laughing, because it was unclear to everyone what will happen to each one's job and life in the times of emergency. Later, remote work and coping at work were naturally selected as the topics of the Lockdown Dialogues I facilitated. I moved to the office to facilitate and particularly tried hard to word the ground rules, which I stumbled with the first time. As experience accumulated, I learned that I can also take more liberties as the facilitator after getting more familiar with the method. Dialogue is a state of mind, not just a method.

Facilitating dialogue has taught me to slow down my thinking and pause. The state of emergency got uncertainty on the move, and thoughts occasionally began to spin a bit too fast. Dialogues turned this cycle in the opposite directions: we can slow down together and pause around each other and important matters. In dialogues, I also sensed a strengthening of empathy, both in me personally and in others. The attitude towards different experiences was compassionate.

There is a lot of things to learn in dialogue that can be strange and odd at first, but it is even more important to dare to engage in them. This also applies to our working community. As a trade union, our role in society is facing an inevitable change. If we do not want to get trampled by history, we must actively find new ways of working. Dialogue plays an important role in it. From the moment when I fumbled towards the first Lockdown Dialogue member meeting, we are now headed towards more extensively activating our trade union community in dialogue.

Recording the dialogue

An important part of the model for national dialogue and the participants' experience of participation and being heard is recording the key themes, points of view and insights of the discussions. Therefore, it is important to have a scribe in the dialogues. It is the task of the scribe to take notes of the content of the dialogue as jointly agreed, without their own interpretation of it. All entries are made anonymously so that no individual can be identified from the notes.

In Lockdown Dialogues, the participants were offered the following pre-defined wording concerning recording:

“Lockdown Dialogues is a nationwide series of dialogues that will build a summary of people's experiences under exceptional conditions. The discussion entries will be used as research data and summaries of the dialogues can be used in diverse ways in national and municipal government and to support the work of NGOs. Nobody's identity will be indicated in the entries and summaries. Research will comply with the ethical codes for research”.

The group engaged in dialogues can also choose that their insights and points of view are not to be used in summaries compiled of all dialogues. Few groups chose this option in Lockdown Dialogues, and often the participants specifically wished that their

experiences would be heard and relayed. The possibility of not sharing data for the summaries is, however, important when the dialogue concerns a sensitive topic or the group does not feel it natural to share due to other reasons, for example.

In the Lockdown Dialogues, the discussion notes, or key themes, points of view and insights that emerged, were submitted on an online form to the Timeout Foundation as soon as possible after the dialogue. The online form requested the following information:

- Number of participants in the discussion
- An estimate of how many of the participants do not usually engage in societal discussion
- Location of the dialogue
- Exact topic of the dialogue
- Where did you hear about the Lockdown Dialogues?
- Notes of the content of the dialogue
- Key insights
- May the insights be shared in communications?
- What succeeded in the dialogue and organising it?
- What was challenging in the dialogue and organising it
- What kind of feedback did you get from the participants?
- How could the support materials be developed?

Analysing dialogues and use of information

Dialogue summaries

The notes and records of the dialogues submitted by the organisers made up the data of the Lockdown Dialogues, and a separate summary was prepared and published for each of the 13 rounds of dialogues. The individual summaries of the rounds of dialogues functioned as topical situation reviews as the pandemic progressed. In addition, a summary comprising all of the dialogues in 2020 was prepared. The data is also comprehensively reviewed in the first part of this publication.

I worked as part of the four-member analysis team that prepared the summaries of the Lockdown Dialogues. The team combined experience in qualitative analysis, dialogue and public governance. Our team reviewed the data of each round of dialogues immediately, analysed it with qualitative methods and prepared a written summary based on the analysis, describing people's experiences and emotions at a given point in time. At the same time, particular attention was paid to what is changing in time, as well as different groups' experiences at each time. Our working method was dialogue-oriented, meaning that we approached the data through multi-criteria discussion and built the key structures of the summaries based on it. The aim was to safeguard the balance of the matters and points of view brought up in the discussions as well as to cherish the spirit of dialogues in the summaries as well.

It was important to the dialogue participants that their experiences are heard and relayed. In fact, this is a key dimension of the sense of participation arising from the dialogues: individual people's emotions and

thoughts become part of a more extensive societal view through the summaries.

“Thank you for having this kind of dialogue and letting us have an impact”.

Participant

“It is important that things are brought to nationwide knowledge, meaning that in addition to sharing experiences, the factual side was also really important”.

Participant

“The excellent dialogue summaries and relaying them are particularly good, in part creating trust in the will to listen to the participants and different target groups and in their experiences being of value”.

Discussion organiser at an NGO

The emerging understanding of people's experiences of the pandemic was crystallised in the dialogue summaries and used in various ways. The summaries prepared for each round of dialogues were published for open access and communicated through press releases, newsletters and articles. The dialogue organisers were encouraged to use the fruits of their own dialogues in their operations. Examples of organisers' experiences and usefulness of the outputs of the dialogues are described in their own channels with the following examples, among others:

- **Artist Natalia Yamschikova** created a series of Instagram cartoons based on Lockdown Dialogues organised by Cultura-säätiö for Finland's Rus-

sian-speaking residents (https://culturafest.fi/emergency_fi) as part of the 2020 CulturaFest.

- **The Association for Rural Culture and Education** (link <https://www.eratauko.fi/poikkeusaika-msl>) reports on its discussions relating to Finnish food production and multi-local living.
- **Pesäpuu ry's** dialogue (link <https://pesapuu.fi/2020/11/poikkeusajan-dialogi>) discussed the current and future lives of children and young people living in vulnerable conditions.
- **Suomen Nuorisoseurat's** (<https://nuorisoseurat.fi/millaista-on-poikkeusajan-arki-harrastajalle-tai-harrastustoiminnan-jarjestajalle/>) discussion considered day-to-day life in exceptional times from the point of view of recreational activity goers and organisers.
- **Laurea** (<https://journal.laurea.fi/elamaa-poikkeusaikana-rikosseuraamusasiakkaana-ja-rikosseuraamusasiakkaan-laheisenena/#c6bf3658>) describes three of its Lockdown Dialogues involving experts by experience and employees of the criminal sanctions sector, family members of criminal sanctions sector clients and council members.
- **Sivis Study Centre** (<https://www.sostefi/blogikirjoitus/tasapainoilua-huolen-ja-toiveikkuuden-valilla-mita-opintokeskus-siviksessa-opittiin-poikkeusajan-dialogeissa-jarjestojen-koronakevaasta/>) contemplates on what Sivis learned from the first COVID-19 spring of NGOs.

Significance of Lockdown Dialogues in government

In government, the Lockdown Dialogues and their summaries played a major role. Corresponding information based on different groups' experiences regarding the emo-

tions of people and state of society could not have been produced in other ways. Compared to questionnaire studies, for example, the data produced in dialogues was rich and deep, and diverse people and groups were reached through NGOs and other communities. It was particularly important that the matters and topics that people felt important in their own communities emerged in the dialogues. In the Lockdown Dialogues, discussions took place during 13 rounds of dialogues, which proved that in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding, it is necessary to have the patience to spend enough time around important things.

The dialogue summaries also provided valuable data for the development of public administration. Dialogue summaries translated into English were used as data for the evaluation that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development performed concerning citizens trust in the public administration in Finland (OECD 2021: Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions in Finland. <https://www.oecd.org/publications/drivers-of-trust-in-public-institutions-in-finland-52600c9e-en.htm>). The summaries functioned as a data set for measures recommended by the OECD to strengthen trust and with which government is currently working. The summaries were also used as background materials in two other OECD evaluations.

The dialogue summaries also functioned as background materials in the national co-ordination of the pandemic and COVID-19 exit planning, and they were relayed to municipalities and senior government leadership. In addition, they provided perspectives into digital day-to-day life and development. The English translations of the summaries have been used in international co-operation to respond to the interest in the concept of National Dialogue and Finnish experiences of coping with the pandemic.

The Lockdown Dialogues also accelerated the government's internal development of dialogue orientation and dialogical struc-

tures. The summaries functioned as data for the open governance strategy published in 2020. Of the dialogue themes, its preparation emphasised particularly the engagement of everyone, sense of community, experiences of those in the most vulnerable social positions, comprehensibility of government actions and clarity of communications. Also, the promotion of dialogue orientation and dialogue use became an important part of the open governance strategy following the experiences of Lockdown Dialogues. This includes co-operation pursuant to the Lockdown Dialogues model with NGOs and other organisations and parties involved, because it is they that reach those in the most vulnerable position in society and their worries.

The Lockdown Dialogues and the model of national dialogue are a living example of how important co-operation with NGOs and other partners is. It is impossible for the government to reach diverse people to be involved in discussions, and it can only take place naturally through partners and the framework of the series of national dialogues. At its best, the co-operation is very agile, but the investment and resources brought by the participants and partners to the joint effort should also be noted.

In government, the Lockdown Dialogues and model for national dialogue are considered to be a significant innovation in the public sector. The operating method of dialogues based on networks and co-operation and the resulting understanding of how people are feeling and what kinds of issues are brought up in the dialogues emphasise the importance of participation as a critical social question. Dialogues look simultaneously forward and backward, into people's experiences and future, and therefore they also produce foresight information.

The Lockdown Dialogues also strengthened the meaningfulness of the work of the civil servants involved. In the dialogue summaries, common people are not seen only as users of diverse social services, but

they become present as human beings. The summaries brought common people and their emotions and worries close, and the experiences of people conveyed by them were touching, moving and delighting. This strengthened the ethos of work carried out in the public sector and made it concrete to whose benefit the work is ultimately done. In the heavy times of crisis, it felt particularly important to be able to work for the common benefit of people and strengthen their future well-being.

The ability to listen to and imagine the different situations in life and day-to-day realities of people outlined in the dialogues is important in government work and anticipating the impacts of decisions. At its best, the discussion summaries compiling the experiences of an extensive and heterogeneous group of people can strengthen the connection between government, the authorities and decision-makers with people's experiences and thereby strengthen a new kind of dialogue between people and government.



“The Lockdown Dialogues have been extremely valuable to us at the Ministry of Finance. They have provided us with valuable experience in dialogue and important information for COVID-19 preparedness work, steering of governance policy and the OECD trust evaluation, among other things”.

Financial councillors Katju Holkeri and Johanna Nurmi, Ministry of Finance

Prerequisites for success and application of the model

Cornerstones of success

The Lockdown Dialogues succeeded in what could seem impossible in a more hierarchical society of weaker trust: co-operation between different parties in which the civil society and government worked as equal partners in enhancing participation and building a better understanding. The crisis situation in spring 2020 functioned as a catalyst of unprejudiced activity, and a structure that enhanced participation was successfully created in the series of discussions: anyone can organise a discussion in their own communities or for their own target groups and thereby process and make visible the thoughts and experiences of their communities. Individual people can join the discussion with a low threshold, and the dialogical method allows people to feel that they are being heard. The discussion summaries, on the other hand, make the understanding that emerged in the discussions part of the big social picture.

The parties involved in different roles identify four factors that made success possible in the Lockdown Dialogues: openness, trust, co-ownership, and mercifulness.

The operation of the Lockdown Dialogues was open and transparent from the very beginning. Anyone could join with a low threshold, and the basic principles of participation were clear and the same for everyone. No individual party dictated the agenda of the dialogues or set strict requirements for them. Instead, a very open framework was used initially: how are people doing in these times, what are they worried about and what gives them hope. Thus, the content of the discussions was determined by the participants'

experiences instead of pre-defined agenda or questions.

The Timeout method that functioned as the backbone of the dialogues is an openly co-developed method that is available and accessible to all with associated materials. Also, the summaries prepared of the discussions were openly available to everyone. Openness tackled any distrust effectively already in advance and created a foundation for the building of trust between the parties involved.

Another key to success was many-sided trust that was also partly based on existing networks and co-operation. The parties operating in the steering group trusted one another and equal co-operation. The dialogue organisers, on the other hand, trusted the Timeout Foundation and Dialogue Academy, parties that they were already partly familiar with and that got in touch with them and invited them to join. The participants dared to join the discussions because they in turn trusted the organisations and people who organised the discussions. This was particularly important in the case of participants in a vulnerable position, who joined the dialogues through NGOs familiar to them. Even a small crack in these chains of trust would have made implementation more difficult.

Trust in the operating method of the Lockdown Dialogues, the Timeout dialogue, was equally significant. The Timeout concept is clear and easy to adopt, and there were well-working materials to support it. Organisers and participants who had already become familiar with Timeout before could trust that the rules of constructive discussion guarantee a certain type of discussion. An individual participant, on the other hand, could trust that everyone would be given an opportunity for a

say in the dialogue and no one would attack them even if they disagreed. Previous experiences of Timeout dialogues also strengthened the participants' and organisers' trust in it being reasonable to take time and just sit down together to discuss without unnecessary gimmicks.

Also, the summaries prepared of the dialogues increased the trust in the process. The participants could see how the understanding that emerged in the dialogues was described. The summaries did not aim to polish anything; different voices and points of views were allowed to co-exist. Equally acknowledging different points of view created a sense of being heard. General trust in government was visible in the recording and compiling of the dialogues, and relaying them to government, for example, did not give rise to suspicions or amazement among the participants. Rather, it was felt that it is important to relay people's genuine experiences in this way.

Openness and trust made it possible to distribute the ownership of the Lockdown Dialogues to all of the parties involved, and experiences of co-ownership transcended all levels of the whole. In the steering group, no party owned the Lockdown Dialogues alone; it was a joint effort. The organisers did not feel that they were organising dialogues for the steering group or commissioned by it, but primarily for themselves, their stakeholders and for the benefit of society. Part of the co-ownership was the Timeout method aimed for free public use. The method itself did not steer the discussions in any specific direction; the content of the dialogues was formed on the conditions of the participants. At the level of an individual dialogue, a participant was allowed to own their own insights, because nobody was forced to a solution or unanimity.

The merciful spirit of the discussions was also deemed to be important. The participants joined as people talking about their own experiences instead of being in a role with heavy expectations. No one had to perform anything, not even dialogue, because being present and listening was the key issue. Sup-

port was available for organising the dialogue, and it was not necessary to master everything beforehand. The inductions emphasised tolerance, learning and team play, because in dialogue no one, not even the facilitator, shoulders the discussion alone. Some supposed that facing shared uncertainty, the exceptional times have brought courage to many things, and that is one of the reasons people were ready to try out this new challenge. It was great to notice that involvement increased the courage in other matters as well and gave certainty to encounter people that were complete strangers to oneself.

Applying and scaling the method

The Lockdown Dialogues were a nationwide series of dialogue covering all of Finland, which is the reason for the name Model for National Dialogue. However, it is possible and even recommended to use the method also in more targeted ways, such as to support regional development, or expand it into an international series of dialogues, for example.

In the local scale, the model can be implemented as dialogical discussions built around a shared theme, with the outputs compiled for stakeholders to use. In this case, there has to be a party that coordinates the dialogues and communicates about them, organisers and facilitators, a group of participants that is as extensive as possible, and analysing the outputs of the dialogues. An example of a targeted implementation in a specific sector is the Foster Care Day dialogues (<https://pesapuu.fi/careday>) organised by Pesäpuu ry, which involved dialogues on successes and future of foster care in child welfare, organised by different parties across Finland during the week of the Foster Care Day. A summary was prepared of the dialogues and published for all child welfare and foster care parties and others interested in the topic to use.



Equally, the model for national dialogue can be applied to other national context or even expanded into an international series of dialogues. Implementation-related questions, such as where to start from and which parties to involve, are always context-specific and tied to each environment. Based on the experience from the Lockdown Dialogues, however, it is possible to identify five key prerequisites for national dialogue pursuant to the Finnish model:

1. It is necessary to have parties with sufficient dialogue expertise and the possibility of allocating resources to the activity

The dialogue resources developed in the long term in Finland and networks associated with them were a requirement for starting such a big whole from scratch. The Dialogue Academy and Timeout Foundation had both content-related expertise and networks, as well as a natural connection with government based on previous co-operation.

2. It is necessary to have a functioning civil society

The operational core team (or corresponding party coordinating the whole) rarely has the means to reach a pluralist group of potential participants directly. Therefore, it is necessary to have the ability to identify diverse civil society parties and invite them to join, because they in turn reach participants belonging to their respective target groups.

3. It is necessary to have openness and trust

In a low-hierarchy society with relatively high trust such as Finland, ministries and civil parties can act openly in co-operation without the risk of the activity involving corruption or other suspicious aspects. This is not a given everywhere.

4. It is necessary to have political freedom

The Lockdown Dialogues were not steered politically, and the associated work in government was carried out by civil servants. Therefore, the framing of the big picture, facilitation of dialogues or communicating about them did not involve political interests or power settings that could have compromised the equality and neutrality of the efforts.

5. It is necessary to have time and flexibility

In organising national dialogue, it is necessary to keep in mind that even though the big picture requires a lot of planning and clear-cut steps, it is not a plan-driven project but above all a process that is flexible in constant change. It is also necessary to understand that dialogues are not a quick fix to any acute pre-defined problem, because understanding and trust emerge over time.



Impact of dialogue from individuals and communities to society



INDIVIDUAL

Dialogue strengthens the feeling of involvement. The individual can trust that their experience matters.

COMMUNITY

Communities use the experience-based knowledge arising in the dialogues, and dialogic structures emerge in them.

CIVIL SOCIETY, MUNICIPALITIES AND STATE

The experienced-based knowledge structured from the dialogues supports decision-making.

SOCIETY

Societal capacity for change is strengthened by extensive dialogue on complex problems.

National dialogue can be used in different scales

LOCAL SCALE

Regional and sector-specific discussions on a joint theme, coordinated by one or more organisations.



Example: Foster Care Day dialogues discussed successes and the future of foster care in child welfare. The experiences were compiled for use by stakeholders.

NATIONAL SCALE

A series of discussions covering all of Finland, realised in co-operation between the civil society and government.



Example: More than 2,000 people took part in the Lockdown Dialogues. They created valuable experience-based knowledge about the challenges of the COVID-19 times to support decision-making.

INTERNATIONAL SCALE

An international series of discussions in extensive co-operation, taking into account the special characteristics of the operating environments.



We need international dialogue that increases understanding and helps to solve global challenges.

Role of dialogue in coping with a crisis



1
CRISIS UNITES THE NATION

2
PROLONGED CRISIS GIVES RISE TO DIVIDING LINES

3
DIALOGUE CAN BUILD BRIDGES

3 Society needs dialogue

“Society needs more dialogue that allows hearing and listening, and sharing own insights without the event being a debate or argument on the ‘right’ point of view”.

Participant

The whole picture of Finland during COVID-19 is not all dialogue, as is shown in the first part by the juxtapositions that emerged in the data from the Lockdown Dialogues. People cope in the same storm, but in very different kinds of boats and with varying sailing skills. At the same time, the Lockdown Dialogues prove that people want to engage in constructive interaction with one another. One would not always believe this, looking at the tight-ened and polarised discussion atmosphere and media that readily grasps polarities. Many assume that they know what others are thinking, but in genuine encounters, these assumptions can change.

The key question is: how we will build more venues and practices for constructive interaction in society? The Timeout dialogue originated from this need. The Lockdown Dialogues have put the Timeout model to an extensive test, and they prove its power and impact also in times of crisis and via remote connections. The Lockdown Dialogues discussion series have had significant impacts on the participants, involved communities and society.

The first dimension of the impact of the Lockdown Dialogues is the participants’ encouraging experience of dialogue. Dialogical discussion was a new experience to many as such, and engaging in dialogue through remote connections was new to almost everyone. The possibility to take the time and space for dialogue that increases understanding was praised by the participants. The possibility to pause and engage in discussion that increases understanding calms one

down, but it also creates hope and opens up perspectives into the future. Dialogue allows being heard, sharing experience and learning from others. Many participants reported that they had gained good insights from other dialogue participants and that they will try out new ways of working in their day-to-day lives, inspired by the discussion. Facing other people’s experiences also provided a unique opportunity for imagining and encountering other people’s different realities and the emotions they arouse, which increased understanding and compassion.

Another dimension of impact is the creation of dialogue and dialogical structures in the involved communities. The experience-based stories in this publication, too, show how people who took part in the first Lockdown Dialogue are now training to be dialogue facilitators, and how there has been progress from the first fumbling experiences of launching dialogue to “*dialogising*” the structures of one’s field of operations on the whole. National dialogue brings together diverse communities and organisations around dialogue with a low threshold, and these experiences encourage to learning about the opportunities provided by dialogue more extensively. Also in government, the Lockdown Dialogues accelerated the government’s internal development of dialogue orientation and dialogical structures.

The third dimension of impact is participation as a critical societal question. Engaging in dialogue supports the idea that there is a place for everyone in this world, and everyone’s experience is needed for building comprehensive understanding. In the Lockdown Dialogues, everyone was able to organise a discussion in their own community or for the target group of their choice and thereby make the thoughts and emotions of the community in question visible. Individual people could join the discussion



with a low threshold, and the dialogical method allowed people to feel that they were being heard. The operating model based on openness, trust and co-operation reached a wide range of people who became part of a more extensive snapshot of society through their communities. Many of the participants and organisers found it particularly important to know that the understanding that emerged from the dialogues was used in governance policy, for example. Development of the dialogue organisers' own operations based on the understanding emerging from the dialogues was also essential.

The fourth dimension of impact is the strengthening of society's capability for change. Dialogues look simultaneously forward and backward, into people's experiences and future expectations, and therefore they also produce foresight information. These emerging signals of the future and new kind of societal dialogue created by the operating model strengthen society's capability for change and the coping of individuals, communities and the nation with diverse challenges. Ecological crises, international tensions and

social and economic inequality are today's challenges, let alone the future challenges we do not know yet. We will need dialogue and structures that support it, both in people's day-to-day lives and society in general, to cope with these complex problems.

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic will become a thing of the past, the need for dialogue will remain. Dialogue plays a crucial role in keeping human communities together and building trust. We have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic that a crisis can connect, but also divide, isolate and break down people and communities. This dispersion is instigated and exploited both from within society and from across its borders. In this case, it is not enough to aim to provide people with sufficient correct information. The actual counterforce to disruption and dispersion is to bring people together. Dialogues that facilitate understanding and genuine encounters build connections between people as well as trust in one another and society. When crises divide people, dialogue brings them back together.

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