

DEMOCRACY DEFENCE DIALOGUES

We are all responsible for strengthening democracy

Kai Alhanen & Elina Henttonen



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Democracy Defence Dialogues

We are all responsible for strengthening democracy

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Contents

Foreword	5
Summary	7
Tiivistelmä	8
Sammanfattning	9
1 Introduction	10
2 Information about the discussions	13
3 First encounters with democracy	15
4 Many faces of democracy	17
Participation starts with being heard	17
Voting at the core of influencing	17
Numerous ways to influence	18
Democracy in daily life: equality, security and freedom	19
Power lies within the majority, but everyone must be heard	20
5 Who are involved in democracy?	22
Children, young people and democracy education	22
Opportunities to influence of those in a vulnerable position	24
Immigrants – in the margins of society?	24
Multi-species coexistence in democracy	25
6 Democracy under threat	26
Democracy is challenging, imperfect and unfinished	26
Passivity of people – cause and effect of poorly functioning democracy	26
Power of money and economic inequality weaken the power of people	27
Remoteness and secrecy of decision-making increase distrust	28
Misinformation, confrontation and lack of trust erode public discussion	28
Democratic values are put to a test in crises	30
A counterforce for dictatorship and war	30

7 We all can defend democracy	32
Developing our ability to see eye-to-eye and deal with differences	32
Expanding our ways of engaging and influencing	33
Language, knowledge and understanding encourage engagement	34
Trust is capital that can be increased	36
8 The meaning of democracy dialogue now and in the future	38
About the authors	40

Foreword

Efforts have been made to strengthen dialogue in our society in recent years. This publication describes the aspiration to utilise the power of dialogue when processing crises at the national level. The war of aggression launched by Russia against Ukraine not only gives rise to concern for national security, but also highlights broader issues. One of these issues concerns the meaning of democracy and its current state. When an authoritarian world power attacks a democracy-oriented smaller country, we are awakened to perceive the specific nature and vulnerability of democracy in a new way. Even a well-functioning democracy cannot be taken for granted and threats targeted at it are both external and internal.

When the Democracy Defence Dialogues were launched, we had already gained experiences of dialogue in a crises for a couple years. We had just completed the two years of Lockdown Dialogues and, inspired by them, started to develop the National Dialogue model. When the Russian attack began, it became obvious that this situation also required dialogue. We thought that people need forum where they can air their feelings and discuss the state of our society in the suddenly unstable world. We did not want to restrict the discussion to the war and security-related issues, but wanted to expand it to concern the current state of the democratic society in general. We believed that every individual has something to say about the meaning of democracy for them and the ways they are willing to defend democracy in their own lives.

A wide range of different parties participated in the organisation of discussions. A great number of people from all around Finland and from different backgrounds contributed to the discussions. In addition, enthusiastic participants from all over the world joined us and Democracy Defence Dialogues were arranged, for example, in Denmark, Latvia, Nepal and Japan. The dialogue organisers went to great lengths to enable successful discussion and genuine dialogue between the participants. We would like to thank them for the plurality of voices from different groups of people – and their variety of views on our shared democracy – presented in this publication.

This publication is the third extensive report under the National Dialogue model. The previous two reports – *Lockdown Dialogues* and *The Great Nature Dialogue* – can be found from Sitra's publications. Together these three publications form the description of social innovation continuum, which was launched by the *Timeout concept* developed by Sitra. They prove that dialogue can be used in various situations, for different topics and by nearly everyone.

The Democracy Defence Dialogues differ at least in two ways from the previous projects. Already at the launching stage, we knew that talking about democracy was not necessarily as natural for all the participants as talking about the pandemic experiences or their own relationship with nature. Regardless of this, we hoped that we could profoundly address this topic that might be challenging for many to talk about on a personal level through dialogue. We also wanted to challenge the participants to think about their own role as actors in the field of democracy, as we believed that dialogue will help in finding and strengthening personal agency in the democratic society. In the light of this publication, this truly seemed to happen.

Each one of the 71 dialogues reported to us was a democracy action in itself. Entries made of the discussions revealed that numerous societal operators and individual people both reconsidered their own roles in the view of democracy agency and, at the same time, developed their own means of strengthening and renewing democracy. Thank you all the defenders!

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Summary

Democracy Defence Dialogues were organised in response to the concerns over the state of democracy arising from Russia's war of aggression. The ruthless attack on Ukraine made many people realise that democracy should not be taken for granted. It needs to be supported every day and reformed continuously. That is an effort that everyone in society should participate in.

In April and June 2022, Democracy Defence Dialogues were hosted by a total of 62 discussion organisers, ranging from municipalities to NGOs and from civic activists to business enterprises. Over 500 people participated in the 71 discussions. The dialogues were organised across Finland and abroad, both face-to-face and remotely.

The discussions highlighted the fact that democracy has a wide range of content in people's daily lives. It is connected to feelings of security and freedom, the experience of participation and engagement, and various ways of exercising influence. In the dialogues, democracy was discussed from various perspectives, ranging from personal experiences to the big political issues of our time. The dialogues showed that practically any individual or community can find links between their own activities and the strengthening of democratic society. The participants talked about what democracy means to them personally, how it is realised in the daily life of different kinds of people, what are the threats to democracy, and what people can do together to defend democracy locally, nationally and globally.

The value of democracy and free civil society is especially relevant in times of crisis. The Democracy Defence Dialogues can be seen as part of national resilience in circumstances where a global pandemic was followed by a major security crisis. The dialogues provided people with opportunities to get together to constructively discuss their experiences and views on democracy. Gathering together, listening to others and reflecting on issues deeply are all part of the democratic way of life. Above all, the dialogues produced valuable experience-based knowledge on how people across Finland, and elsewhere around the world, are attached to democracy and what their views are with regard to the current state of democracy.

Democratic society is a living and developing entity. The more comprehensively we can engage different kinds of people and a plurality of voices in the discussion, the better we are equipped to defend democracy today and in the future.

Tiivistelmä

Demokratian puolustusdialogit järjestettiin vastauksena Venäjän hyökkäyssodan nostamaan huoleen demokratian tilasta. Ukrainaan kohdistunut häikäilemätön hyökkäys havahdutti monet huomaamaan, että demokratia ei ole itsestäänselvyys. Sitä on tuettava päivittäin ja uudistettava jatkuvasti. Tähän työhön tarvitaan kaikkia kansalaisia.

Demokratian puolustusdialogeihin osallistui huhti- ja kesäkuussa 2022 62 keskustelunjärjestäjää kunnista kansalaisjärjestöihin ja kansalaisaktiiveista yrityksiin. Osallistujia 71 keskustelussa oli yhteensä yli 500. Dialogeja järjestettiin ympäri Suomea ja ulkomailla, kasvotusten ja etänä.

Keskustelut toivat esiin, että demokratia saa ihmisten elämässä moninaisia sisältöjä ja kytkeytyy niin turvallisuuden ja vapauden tunteisiin, kokemuksiin osallisuudesta, kuin erilaisiin vaikuttamiseen tapoihin. Demokratia valottui dialogeissa lukuisista eri näkökulmista, ulottuen henkilökohtaisista kokemuksista aina aikamme suuriin poliittisiin kysymyksiin. Dialogit osoittivat, että lähes jokainen yksittäinen kansalainen ja yhteisö voi löytää omasta toiminnastaan kiinnostavia demokraattisen yhteiskunnan vahvistamiseen. Keskusteluissa pohdittiin, mitä demokratia itse kullekin merkitsee, miten se erilaisten ihmisten arjessa toteutuu, mikä demokratiaa uhkaa ja mitä voimme yhdessä tehdä demokratian puolustamiseksi paikallisesti, kansallisesti ja maailmanlaajuisesti.

Demokratian ja vapaan kansalaisyhteiskunnan arvo nousee erityisellä tavalla näkyviin kriisien ajassa. Demokratian puolustusdialogit kiinnittyvät osaksi kansallista henkistä kriisinkestävyyttä tilanteessa, jossa globaalia pandemiaa seurasi laaja turvallisuuskriisi. Dialogit loivat kansalaisille paikkoja kokoontua yhteen käsittelemään rakentavalla tavalla kokemuksiaan ja näkemyksiään demokratiasta. Yhteen tuleminen, toisten kuunteleminen ja asioiden syvälinen pohtiminen on osa demokraattista elämäntapaa. Ennen kaikkea dialogit tuottivat arvokasta kokemustietoa siitä, miten kansalaiset eri puolilla Suomea ja myös muualla maailmassa kiinnittyvät demokratiaan ja kokevat sen tilan.

Demokraattinen yhteiskunta elää ja kehittyy. Mitä kattavammin saamme keskusteluun mukaan erilaisia ihmisiä ja erilaisia ääniä, sitä paremmat keinot meillä on puolustaa demokratiaa nyt ja tulevaisuudessa.

Sammanfattning

Försvarsdialoger för demokratin ordnades som ett svar på den oro över demokratin tillstånd som uppstod på grund av Rysslands anfallskrig. Den hänsynslösa attacken mot Ukraina gjorde många medvetna om att demokratin inte är en självklarhet. Den måste stödjas dagligen och förnyas kontinuerligt. Alla medborgare behövs för detta arbete.

Försvarsdialoger för demokratin hade i april–juni 2022 62 diskussionsorganisatörer, från kommuner till icke-statliga organisationer och från medborgaraktivister till företag. Sammanlagt hade 71 diskussioner över 500 deltagare. Dialoger ordnades runt om i Finland och utomlands, som fysiska möten och på distans.

Diskussionerna lyfte fram att demokratin får olika slags innehåll i människors liv och att den kopplas till såväl känslor av trygghet och frihet som upplevelser av delaktighet och olika sätt att påverka. Demokratin belystes i dialogerna ur flera olika perspektiv, och den sträckte sig från personliga erfarenheter till vår tids stora politiska frågor. Dialogerna visade att nästan varje enskild medborgare och gemenskap i sin egen verksamhet kan hitta beröringspunkter med stärkandet av ett demokratiskt samhälle. I diskussionernas reflekterades över vad demokrati betyder för var och en, hur den förverkligas i olika människors vardag, vad som hotar demokratin och vad vi kan göra tillsammans för att försvara demokratin lokalt, nationellt och globalt.

Demokratin och det fria civilsamhällets värde framträder på ett speciellt sätt i kristider. Försvarsdialoger för demokratin blir en del av den nationella psykiska motståndskraften mot kriser i en situation där den globala pandemin åtföljdes av en omfattande säkerhetskris. Dialogerna skapade för medborgarna platser där de kunde samlas för att på ett konstruktivt sätt behandla sina erfarenheter av och åsikter om demokratin. Att samlas, lyssna på andra och ha djupa reflektioner är den del av ett demokratiskt levnadssätt. Framför allt gav dialogerna värdefull erfarenhetskunskap om hur medborgare i olika delar av Finland och även i andra delar av världen anknyter sig till demokratin och upplever dess tillstånd.

Det demokratiska samhället lever och utvecklas. Ju mer vi får med olika slags människor och röster i diskussionen, desto bättre medel har vi för att försvara demokratin nu och i framtiden.

1 Introduction

Democracy Defence Dialogues were organised in response to the concerns over the state of democracy arising from Russia's war of aggression. The ruthless attack on Ukraine made many people realise that democracy should not be taken for granted. It needs to be supported every day and reformed continuously. This work requires contributions from everyone, as we all – as individuals and communities – have the opportunity to support democracy in our everyday lives.

In April and June, Democracy Defence Dialogues, coordinated by Sitra, [the Dialogue Academy](#), [Timeout Foundation](#), [Prime Minister's Office](#) and [Ministry of Finance](#), were hosted by a total of 62 discussion organisers, ranging from municipalities to NGOs and from civic activists to business enterprises. Over 500 people participated in the 71 discussions. The dialogues were organised across Finland, both face-to-face and remotely. Democracy Defence Dialogues were also organised globally, as far away as in Nepal and Japan.

In Finnish society dialogue is gaining ground as means to bring people together and strengthen democracy. Many actors from civil society, NGO's, administration, and private sector have joined this "dialogue movement" and applied dialogue models and methods in their work. This also showed in Democracy Defence Dialogues that attracted various organisers. Many of the discussion organisers were not characterised as "democracy actors", as Democracy Defence Dialogues aimed to address all kinds of democracy actions of people and communities. According to the organisers' estimation, most of the dialogue participants (80%) had not participated in similar discussions before. Many participants stated that this was the first time they have engaged in in-depth discussions about the meaning of

democracy for themselves. Democracy Defence Dialogues were attended by a wide range of people. When reviewing the participant information, it seems that the only group of people missing from the participants was small children. This means that a broad range of voices of the entire society is heard in this summary.

As a discussion topic, democracy is not the easiest, but even more important. As a rule, democracy is understood as a political system in which people elect persons to decide on shared matters from among themselves. Representation-based decision-making was strongly present in the discussions, but democracy was also discussed from the perspective of interaction between people within the family, educational institutions, hobby and working communities, different services, institutions and media. The discussions highlighted the fact that democracy, as a concept, has a wide range of different meanings in people's daily lives. It is connected to feelings of security and freedom, the experience of participation and engagement, and various ways of exercising influence.

The dialogues revealed that practically any individual or community can find links between their own activities and the strengthening of democratic society. The participants talked about what democracy means to them personally, how it is realised in the daily life of different kinds of people and what people can do together to defend democracy locally, nationally and globally.

The contributions of the discussion organisers were significant in terms of the success of the extensive democracy discussion. Everyone one of them made considerable efforts to phrase the discussion topic in accordance with their target group and ensure dialogue-oriented discussions. The

organisers worked hard to invite the participants to the dialogue and report the content of the discussions forward. Without these remarkable efforts, hundreds of people would have been deprived of the opportunity to consider their relationship to democracy, and our common understanding of people's ways of perceiving and defending democracy would have remained narrower.

The discussions were organised using the constructive societal discussion Timeout model. Timeout is a social innovation developed in Finland: an open source dialogue model, which includes the tools and guidelines for facilitating constructive discussions. In Finland, more than 350 organisations use Timeout in their work and 65 000 people have participated in Timeout dialogues. *In Democracy Defence Dialogues*, the discussion

organisers received orientation in the Timeout model as well as support material for facilitating the discussions and inviting the participants. These materials can be utilised by everyone arranging a democracy dialogue in the future.

Democracy Defence Dialogues made democracy a topic that concerns us all. The dialogical approach of the discussions reflected the core of democracy at best: equal conversation about important shared issues. Therefore, democracy was discussed in the dialogues from various perspectives, ranging from personal experiences to the big political issues of our time. Perspectives of those considering democracy for the first time as well as those who study it professionally emerged.

Dialogues on democracy

Dialogue refers to a specific way of discussion that aims to increase understanding of the topic, other people and oneself. Dialogue researches the significance of things based on the different experiences of people. In dialogical discussions, 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 treating others with respect strengthen trust and equality and thereby create a foundation for solving problems together. Defending democracy also requires dialogue that reinforces understanding and trust at all levels of society from local communities to international decision-making.

This summary describes the key content and views of the discussions on the basis of the collected material. We have read the materials of the 71 dialogues closely and studied the themes and viewpoints raised by individual discussions. In our analysis, we brought the discussions together into one large dialogue in which the voices of different participants and groups engage in a shared dialogue. The experiences and

thoughts of different participants are present in the text as numerous citations.

In the analysis, we did not distinguish between discussions arranged in Finland and abroad, as the spectrum of views is broad in dialogues organised both in Finland as well as abroad. The essence of democracy is rather similar in discussions engaged in in different countries, but it is reflected to the history and current situation of each country

in a unique manner. We collected concrete examples from Finnish society, which was subject of the most discussions.

The summary will start with the introduction of the background information, discussion organisers and participants. Then, we will describe the early democracy experiences of the participants, multiple meanings related to democracy, reflections about the groups belonging to democracy, threats to democracy and means of defending democracy. When we talk about citizens we mean the members of the democratic society: also foreigners living in the country, children and young people.

Democracy Defence Dialogues is one application of the recently launched National Dialogue model developed in Finland. The purpose of National dialogues is to learn from citizens' experiences and gain understanding and up-to-date information on societal phenomena, challenges and opportunities. In other words, National Dialogues consists of discussion series on topics and

phenomena, which have societal impact across the entire country, and anyone can participate in arranging their own dialogue. The insights from dialogues are made available for everyone, including municipalities and public administration, to support decision-making. This means that Democracy Defence Dialogues continue the civil dialogue launched by [Lockdown Dialogues](#) and [The Great Nature Dialogue](#).

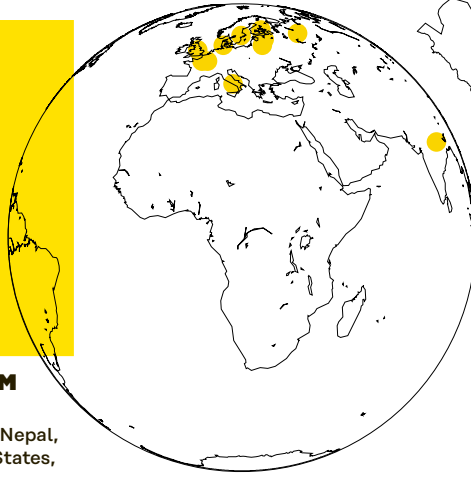
Democracy Defence Dialogue also offered a possibility to expand the Finnish dialogue movement internationally, and test how the discussion script and operating model for discussion organisation developed in Finland work at the international level. The international discussion organizers were invited to join and carry out their dialogue in their own country or context. They were provided with the Timeout dialogue tools and instructions, as well as personal tutoring. As a result Democracy defence dialogues were organised in eleven different countries and in seven languages.

2 Information about the discussions

11

THE DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS CAME FROM 11 DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

Italy, the United Kingdom, Japan, Latvia, Nepal, Germany, Finland, Denmark, the United States, Russia, Estonia



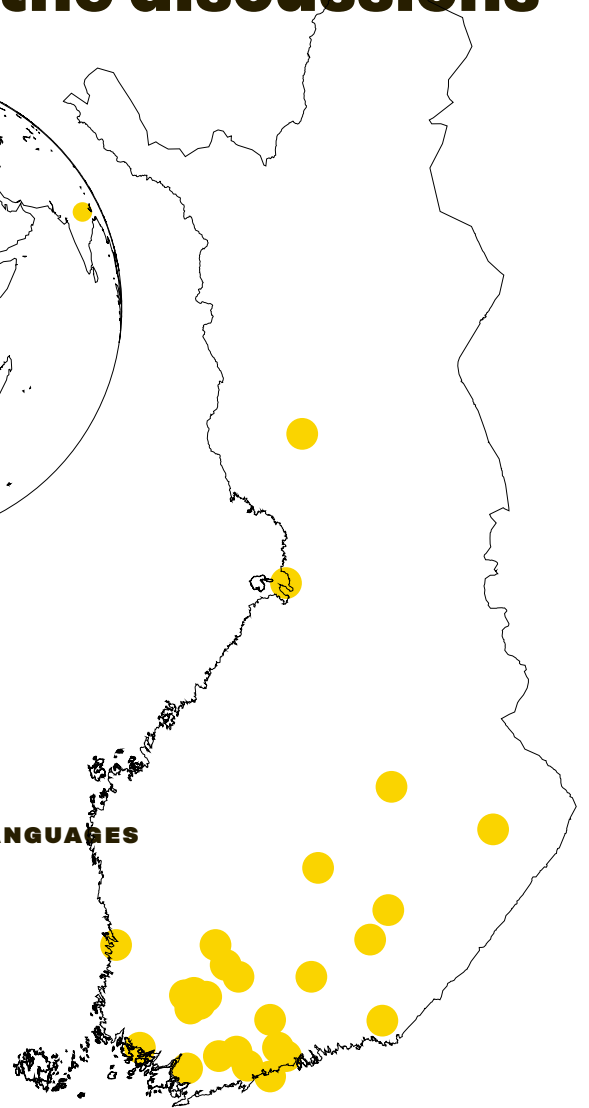
27 7

FROM 27 MUNICIPALITIES

Espoo	Kuopio	Rovaniemi
Forssa	Lahti	Tammela
Helsinki	Lohja	Tampere
Humppila	Miehikkälä	Turku
Hyvinkää	Mikkeli	Tuusula
Hämeenlinna	Mäntyharju	Valkeakoski
Joensuu	Oulu	Vantaa
Jokioinen	Perniö	Veikkola
Jyväskylä	Pori	Ypäjä

AND SPOKE 7 LANGUAGES

Danish
English
Finnish
Japanese
Latvian
Russian
Swedish



62

62 DISCUSSION ORGANISERS

14–80

THE AGE RANGE OF PARTICIPANTS WAS 14–80-YEARS

71

71 DISCUSSIONS

500

MORE THAN 500 PARTICIPANTS

80%

80% OF THE PARTICIPANTS HAD NOT PARTICIPATED IN SIMILAR DISCUSSIONS BEFORE

90%

NEARLY 90% OF THE ORGANISERS THINK THAT THERE WILL ALSO BE A NEED FOR DEMOCRACY DIALOGUES IN THE FUTURE.

PARTICIPANTS

THE PARTICIPANTS INCLUDES, FOR EXAMPLE:

activists, activists and experts of organisations and associations, administrative managers, administrators and chairpersons, advisors, agriculture experts, authors, Bachelors of Social Services, business advisors, business coaches, business college graduates, career coaches, civic activists, cleaners, coders, community developers, construction sector experts, consulate employees, dance, decision-makers, delegates, democracy experts, department heads, development managers and directors, dialogue instructors, directors and managers, doctors, drivers, early childhood education teachers, editors, education sector employees, election observers, employees, entrepreneurs, equality experts, executive directors, experts, experts by experience, experts in art, Finns living abroad, gardeners, immigrants, inventors, joint municipal

authorities, language and communications experts, lawyers, library employees, local politicians, Members of Parliament, municipal employees, occupational therapists, officers for social affairs, pedagogues, pensioners, political activists, post-graduate researchers, principals, producers, product developers, professionals in elderly care, professors, project coordinators and managers, project planners, psychologists, public officials and civil servants, pupils, reading and literature experts, refugees, rehabilitators, researchers, residents, restaurant employees, secretary-generals, sellers, senior advisers, seniors, social welfare experts, students, teachers, theatre and culture, training planners and directors, unemployed persons, university teachers, upper secondary school students, volunteers, well-being sector operators, youth representatives

62 ORGANISERS

62 DISCUSSION ORGANISERS WHO SUBMITTED DISCUSSION RECORDS

Aleksi Lumme, Allergy, Celia library, Centre for Economic Development, Citizen Forum, Citizens' Forum, City of Hämeenlinna, City of Helsinki, City of Pori, City of Vantaa/ Shared Table/Vantaa joint parishes, Cultura-säätiö, Development Centre Opinkirjo, Dialogue Academy/Aretai Oy, Embassy of Finland, En-musubi (Japan), Epoque Dialogue Institute (Japan), Fingo, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Globe Art Point, House of Bear, Hyogo Dialogue Study Group (Japan), Hyvinkää city library, KaiWorks Oy, Kaltio Creative/Kokoamo/the Regional Council of Lapland, Kathmandu (Nepal), Kela (Social Insurance Institution of Finland), Kouluokino School Cinema Association (Association of Finnish Children's Cultural Centers), Louna web libraries/the Taukotila project, Ministry of Finance/Avoim hallinto, Miyamae Volunteer Association (Japan), Moniheli ry, municipal enterprise Otavia owned by the City of Mikkelä, Nicehearts ry, Nordic Council of Ministers' Office (Latvia), North Karelian Society for Social Security, NPO Almond Community Network (Japan), NPO Dialogue Prac-

tice Institute (DPI) (Japan), Nuorten Suomi, Operation Libero Finland, Ostrobothnia Regional Council/Pohjanmaan Yhdistykset (POHY)/Wellbeing Services County of Ostrobothnia's municipal authority, Pirkanmaa regional youth delegate, Roboline Group Oy, Satakunnan Vihreät ry, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Silakkaliike, Sitra, Skin and Asthma Federation, Statistics Finland, TAIWA de SIEN wo manabu kai OKAYAMA (Japan), The Deaconess Foundation/D-ase-ma Kallio, the Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired, the Finnish Institute in Estonia (Estonia), the Finnish Local Heritage Federation, the Finnish Reading Center, the Finnish Seamen's Mission and Finland Society, the Finnish Society on Media Education, the Institute for the Languages of Finland (Kotus), the Kohti nuorten hyvinvointialueita project (Youth Academy, the National Archives of Finland, the PANDEMICS programme (the Strategic Research Council of the Academy of Finland), the Threshold Association, the Union of Local Youth Councils in Finland), Think Africa ry, Timeout Foundation, Transport and the Environment of North Karelia, University of Helsinki, We Do Democracy (Denmark)

Concrete Democracy Dialogues tools for organising discussions

Would you like to organise your own Democracy Dialogue?

When organising your own discussion, you can use the materials on the [Democracy Defence Dialogues website](#):

- An invitation template and suggestions on how and when to invite participants to the events as well as a Timeout Dialogue script that includes guidance on how to facilitate the dialogue
- The materials package for discussion organisers including tips and tools for the dialogues: Dialogue process, Ground rules for a constructive discussion, Cards for facilitating a discussion and a brief fact file on democracy as a topic
- A video introduction to the participants in the dialogue to encourage an in-depth and multidimensional discussion
- Materials for social media

Organisers of discussions are required to:

- Define an exact topic of the discussion
- Book a physical space and possible refreshments or a platform for remote participation
- Invite the participants
- Appoint someone to take notes
- Facilitate the dialogue
- Report on the key themes, views and observations raised during the discussion, as necessary

3 First encounters with democracy

“Sharing a bottle of lemonade between my siblings. One bottle and four or five glasses. The one who pours the drink and shares it, will pick up their own glass last. And, still it always leads to an argument. But, this is how I perceive democracy; taking care of shared issues and things so that it is as equal as possible.”

Many dialogues started with the participants’ early experiences of democracy. The range of memories was broad. It included festive moments of representative democracy rites and memories of significant political upheavals in Finland and abroad. Nevertheless, most discussion participants remembered everyday moments when they were experiencing participation and equality.

Many democracy memories were related to home, family and local community: voting what to eat at dinner, planning a holiday trip together, agreeing on rules for games together with other children, listening to the parents discussing party politics, visiting a polling station with them, having an election coffee and following friends and relatives who were politically active.

Democracy was also reflected through various discussions with friends and acquaintances. One participant stated that: *“I was thinking about places where I’ve had societal discussions, and bars came to my mind. In bars, I’ve had a variety of discussions, some louder than others, on many different topics. We might have been on opposite sides about issues, but I never left the table angry.”*

Finland is such a small country that state-level politics may come very close at times. One participant said *“I felt like a citizen when I saw the president at the polling station; it was a real citizenship experience”*.

Schools and hobbies also offer engagement on democracy. The discussion partici-

pants reminisced how they participated in student boards, Hymypatsas (smile statute) voting and shadow elections at the school. These moments might have taught something essential about being a citizen. In the Scout Oath taken by a participant at the age of seven, they promised to be active in society, but democracy was also implemented at a more practical level: *“we pondered together about the name of our group. Then, we decided on a couple of alternative names and voted on the final name. This is at least one concrete example of how I got to influence within my own community.”* When practicing democracy, it also became evident that different views are part of it: *“We had shadow elections in the secondary school, and an upper secondary school student who had moved from the countryside admitted to having voted for Väyrynen and I still found them OK.”*

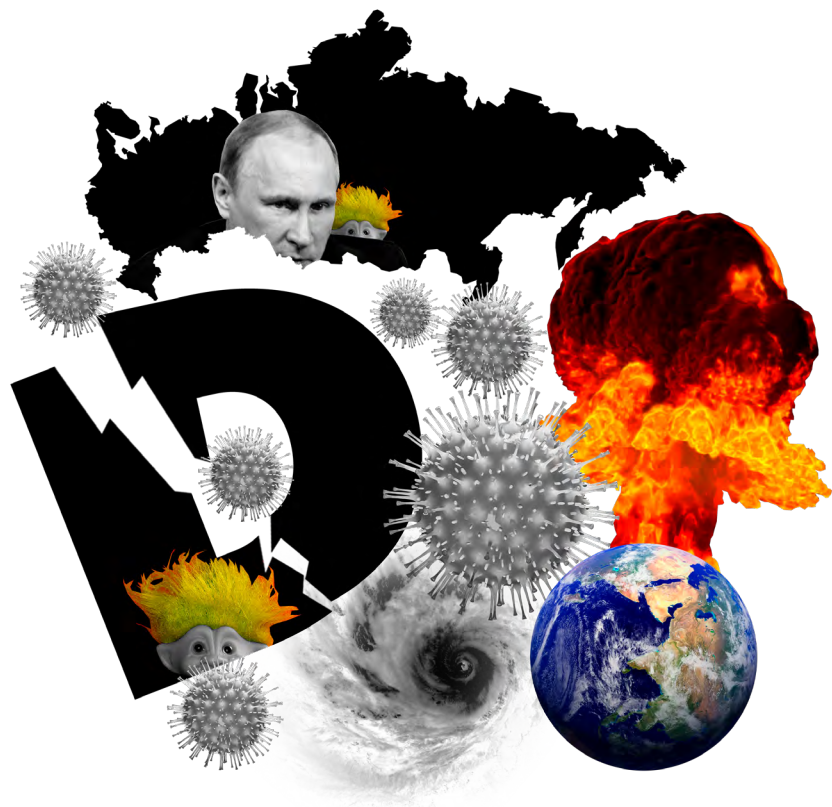
Democracy experiences were also created through activism: attending peace marches, organising demonstrations and writing opinions. Some of the democracy-related memories were related to moments of great social impact. *“I can remember when they were counting the voting slips and they only said Kekkonen, Kekkonen, Kekkonen”,* remembered one of the participants. Another one said that *“one of my first memories was when my mother said that Kekkonen has died. I didn’t know who this Kekkonen was, but I realised that this was a big thing”*. One participant told how they watched the

collapse of the Berlin Wall on TV and how they understood then that democracy does not exist everywhere in the world.

Not all the early democracy memories of the participants were positive. Some had experienced exclusion in the school, hobby communities or sports clubs: *“I have a lot of undemocratic school-related memories.”* Belonging to a minority may have been highlighted especially in situations related to democracy. A participant with a physical disability described their experiences of elections: *“There were premises that were not accessible for disabled people where the voting took place. I remember thinking clearly, even as a child, that there were no people with a physical disability as candidates in the elections.”* One participant remembered that *“we wanted to use our social studies lesson for participating in a demonstration in Helsinki, but our teacher did not let us do that”*. In other words, the meaning of equality and participation strongly related to democracy may also have crystallised through non-realisation.

The dialogue participants also included many people who had been born or lived in a non-democratic society: *“We can sit here and talk about issues openly; this is democracy. In my home country, you can’t do this; nobody can ask where the money comes from or why women can participate in this.”* Some people who had grown up under an authoritarian governance system started to understand democracy after living for a while in a democratic country: *“When you realise that your words matter. And vice versa, if your words are not considered and you cannot influence, you cannot get experiences of living in democracy.”*

The early experiences of the discussion participants show how democracy is not only associated with certain social institutions and politics. Instead, democracy expands in many different ways – visibly or sometimes on the background – covering nearly everything in people’s lives. At the same time, it is obvious that experiences of democracy even within one society may be powerful for some and totally lacking for others.



4 Many faces of democracy

“What is democracy? I don’t know, can’t say what democracy is. But, I think that a war is not democratic, and that a virus is not democratic. But, the fact that we can sit here in a circle and talk about things openly, that is democracy.”

Almost all discussions noticed that democracy means several things at the same time. For many participants, democracy primarily means the opportunity to get their voices heard and to influence. Influencing was mostly seen as voting, but many other influencing methods were also addressed in the discussions. Some participants also emphasised the role of democratic values in everyday life, especially from the perspective of equality, security and freedom. Intense reflection was raised by the question of who should have the power in democratic communities and what is the status of minorities in democracy.

Participation starts with being heard

One participant said that *“For me, democracy means that I can say things out loud and be also heard”*. For another participant, democracy means *“freedom of speech and expression”* and that *“everyone can express their own opinions”*.

Democracy may mean *“that listening and hearing others is mandatory in society”*. One participant said that *“in democracy, all different people should be heard in matters concerning them and in shared matters”*. Another participant claimed: *“Democracy in the western culture is the best way to create the basis of a civilised country in which people, individuals and*

communities have the opportunity to influence their own living environments and future”.

Many different forms of genuinely listening to people’s experiences are required. What suits one person does not necessarily suit another. Therefore, it is important *“that everyone has an opportunity to influence, in one way or other, and find their own ways to participate in the matters and discussion in this society”*. Everyone can do their part, *“and I can decide by myself whether I want to put more effort into participating in decision-making”*.

Voting at the core of influencing

For several participants, democracy simply means *“shared decision-making power in which people have an opportunity to influence”*. In a democratic society, *“everyone can influence things by voting”* and people have *“the right and obligation to vote”*. This is not just one practical way of deciding on shared matters. Electoral democracy also includes a more profound thought about people living together. For many participants, democracy is a sign of a civilised country where *“people have the power to choose representatives supporting their own values to decide on matters”*.

For many dialogue participants, the essence of democracy is crystallised in voting

in elections: *“People should vote, as this is the greatest power that an individual can exercise”*. In other words, the right to vote should be taken seriously, as this power includes also responsibilities. Some participants thought that this powerful right can be regarded as an obligation concerning everyone entitled to vote: *“in democracy, voting should be a basic civic duty.”* However, another participant noted that *“it is also a democratic choice to not to vote; a decision to not to believe in the prevailing system”*. Another participant described the situation: *“there are no situations in which people do not influence – choose not to do something – is as influential as being active. It is a choice which has impact.”*

The discussions also raised issues related to election-based representative democracy, as voting also highlights many faults of democracy. One discussion stated that *“representation-based democracy means constant measuring of popularity for those involved and acting on the basis of that which weakens the democratic process”*.

It was difficult for some participants to understand the differences between parties. Others were concerned that *“those who have a better education and are well-off vote more actively, but the supporters of left-wing parties do not vote”*. At the same time, some were wondering *“whether everyone is capable of deciding on everything? It is good that big decisions are made by people who know more about things”*.

Some participants found it conflicting that *“the presidential elections have the highest turnout, although the president has the least power, and the municipal elections have the lowest turnout although people could have the biggest impact on their own things and how they are taken care of by voting in the municipal elections”*. In other words, voting in elections is important, but it executes democracy in an incomplete manner.

This leads the participants to consider other meanings and ways of executing

“Is it democracy if only 40% of people vote?”

democracy. Some *“are even irritated by the understanding of the core of democracy as just voting”*. One participant stated that *“our understanding of democracy emphasises the political system, while the other side is the democratic way of life, which is a broader concept and should concern us all”*. A democratic way of life does not, however, feel realistic to everyone: *“If it was a way of living, it would seem unattainable. What is democracy, what does it promote and who is it intended for?”*

“I’m interested in knowing how people could see themselves as democratic actors other than just voters.”

Numerous ways to influence

Living up to democracy is not restricted to politics and elections. The wide range of Democracy Defence Dialogues organisers shows how different associations have an essential role as cornerstones of a democratic society and how active civil society is a significant part of democracy. Experiences of the discussion participants included associative and organisational activities, volunteer work, residents' associations, student boards, parents' associations, customer panels, citizens' initiatives, citizens' panels and participatory budgeting.

As with voting, the dialogues also addressed the weaknesses and strengths of these ways of influencing. Sometimes civic activism was regarded as hard work but, for example, *“concrete participation in invasive alien plant species prevention was considered*

rewarding and an easy way to participate". Participatory budgeting in municipalities concerns only small amounts of money, but it can *"increase the interest of those living in the municipality in taking care of shared matters"*. Different examples gives people hope for having opportunities to influence: *"Highlighting good examples, for example, when a group of people has succeeded in influencing."*

Some participants had also had experiences of civic activism resorting to visible and unconventional ways of influencing. Activism was seen as a way to influence society when other actions feel insufficient. By activism, one can *"influence the shortcomings of decision-making and the influencing culture of mainstream politics"*. Activism was also regarded as raising people's awareness of the basics of democracy. This is reflected, for example, in the civil disobedience of the Extinction Rebellion movement: *"how do those who had to wait in the street view those sitting on the street who do not fit into their world view; I think that democracy is crystallised in these moments – not when two people face each other around a table."*

Technological development also shapes the influencing possibilities in democracy. Especially *"the current information technologies and practices create huge opportunities to expand democratic activities and information-based interaction methods, and we can adopt more open democratic activity methods together"*. It is often thought that young people in particular want to influence through new methods, in addition to or even instead of institutional means, *"such as social media shares, social media campaigns; social media supports you when making your own voice heard and enables the introduction of different topics into discussion"*. On social media, it possible to both *"organise demonstrations defending democracy without a single leader"* as well as *"shape opinions both digitally and analogically"*.

New channels of influence may open up pathways for new content and result in broader societal consequences. According to one participant, the social media posts of *"subjective, everyday things, one's own thoughts, feelings and experiences eliminate polarisation and may build communities"*.

However, one discussion pointed out that *"we are a very text-oriented society"*. It should be noted that *"not everyone wants to participate through verbal expressions"*. For some, the preferred means could be, for example, *"visual expression, because you can say a lot more things than if you take your opinion or something else to a parade somewhere"*. Therefore, the diversity of the ways of influencing should reflect the diversity of people.

Democracy in daily life: equality, security and freedom

"The right to have opportunities, the right to get help, be different, be appreciated with my differences, the right to believe that democracy will help us all."

According to the discussion participants *"democracy brings security to everyday life"*. This is considered to be based on treating all people equally, which is an aim nourished in democracy. In a democratic society *"everyone can feel safe regardless of their backgrounds or situations in life"*. This is related to basic human rights: *"everyone can be themselves and be heard, even if they belong to a minority"*. In a democratic society, *"everyone can feel safe to be themselves and live their own kind of life"*. In other words, the mean-

ing of equality and individual rights must be more than just words and must be felt at a personal level: *“an equal society is founded on experiences – it can be achieved when individuals feel that they can participate and are equal.”*

Security created through democracy has multiple dimensions. Security also means *“trust between different people as well as between individuals and administration”* and *“willingness to act and take actions towards the common good and respecting everyone”*. The discussions pointed out that the principle of transparency, i.e. openness of public administration procedures, is part of democracy.

The participants who had lived in less democratic countries or followed social life there discussed the insecurity prevailing in these countries and the lack of freedom stemming from it: *“There was no freedom to express yourself, as you never knew who you could trust and who would report you. The lack of freedom in the daily life was horrible.”* Lack of freedom may cause the idea of democracy to remain unclear to people. One participant described how, in their previous home country, *“I did not learn what democracy means or why it is needed”*. In Finland, *“I suddenly felt that I’m in a democratic country. And, for me, democracy does not mean the majority, but a situation in which anyone who is part of a minority feels they are a full member of society”*.

Security created through democracy enables disagreement and the expression of it. One of the participants summed it up saying: *“being in opposition is possible and safe.”* The participant continued by describing benefits created by plurality of voices: *“opposition thinking makes decision-making more planned and brings pluralism forward.”* All in all, *“democracy has the best chance to thrive in a society with plenty of well-being, opportunities and prospects”*, said one participant.

Power lies within the majority, but everyone must be heard

Several discussions addressed the relationship between the majorities and minorities. Democracy was characterised as making majority decisions, but also by hearing the minorities. In democracy, *“things are discussed together but decisions are made by majority”*, concluded the dialogues. *“The opinions of the majority are approved even if I don’t agree with them”*, says one participant.

However, the power of the majority is not quite unequivocal, but includes many questions and problems. First of all, not everyone believes that the majority of the population is comprehensively heard: *“Always, when a decision is made, it is said that this is what the people want. But nobody asks the people. Most of the time. Only sometimes. I feel that people’s opinions are not considered.”* One discussion also pointed out that *“if everyone has similar power to decide on common matters, it means that, in practice, nobody has the power”*. The discussion participants wondered *“whose right is the right one if everyone has the right to say what is on their minds and what their opinions are?”*

It is possible that the majority power will turn into a threat to democracy. One participant stated that *“democracy has turned into a majority dictatorship, and it is used ruthlessly to centralise power”*. The discussions also point out that democracy does not always mean *“promoting liberal and progressive values”*. The will of the majority may also mean *“orientation in a more conservative direction, and this must also be acceptable”*. Brexit was referred to in one discussion as an example of a situation in which people *“were not happy about the situation. Although people make bad decisions, it is nevertheless part of democracy; a certain kind of freedom”*.

Democracy requires *“respect for different opinions and tolerance of various opinions and values systems”*, so that everyone can

participate in discussions and decision-making. One participant said that “*democracy is all about understanding the world and oneself and sharing this understanding with others*”. However, this involves a great challenge: “*I have never thought about people whom I don’t*

know – how can we listen to the voices of the world unknown to us?” Promoting democracy in politics as well as in the daily life of people requires continuous expansion of the horizon, which means that we involve people whom we have not yet heard.

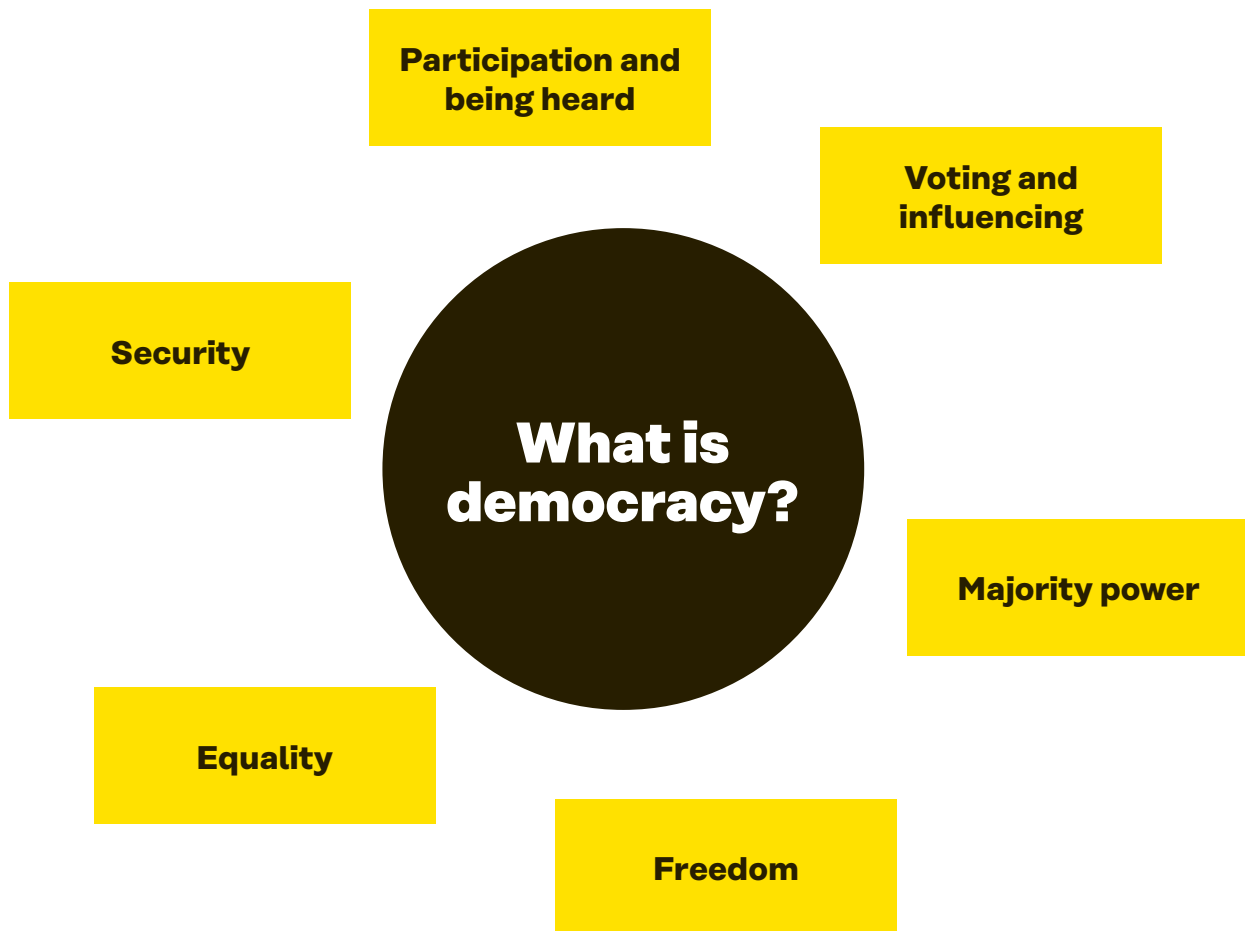


Figure 1. Meanings given to democracy by the participants.

5 Who are involved in democracy?

“What is our ideal citizen in a democracy? What kind of an ideal citizenship are we subconsciously nurturing?”

Democracy is defined as the power of people within a nation, but many dialogues asked “what is a nation?” and “who feels that they are a part of this nation?” The war in Europe also raised a question “when we defend Finland, what are we actually defending? Are we defending Finns and Finnishness or should we defend everyone who is and lives here?” This means that the discussions about democracy made the participants consider whether democracy belongs to everyone and who might be excluded from it. One participant described how discussions about democracy “reveal feelings of detachment, exclusion and strangeness”. Many discussions found groups that were not necessarily included in democracy. At the same time, the concept of an “ideal citizen” was questioned.

Children, young people and democracy education

“Isn’t democracy in one’s blood? Something should be done about this!”

Many dialogues led to discussions about the role of children and young people in democracy. It was found extremely important for the vitality of democracy that the engagement of children and young people in society be ensured. It was also emphasised that

democracy education will maintain and renew the cross-generational continuum of democracy.

“Children grow up to be voters, participants and policy creators – as obvious as it is, but still true,” said one participant. The discussion participants believe that we already learn democracy in our early years: *“We learn how to act as early as at day-care.”* Another participant describes *“you will remember when you are an adult if your opinions have been taken into account in small matters when you were child, your mother was interested in what you wanted to eat or you were involved in making the decision about which play you would perform next at school”*. From the democratic perspective, it is of utmost importance that children are provided with feelings of participation and that their self-esteem is supported: *“I am important, my story is important, thank you for sharing your story.”*

However, feelings of participation do not simply occur, and many operating methods in different communities actually prevent them. For example, *“the school as an institution includes structural injustices and anti-democratic practices”*. The participants are aware that it requires a lot from adults to *“dare to trust children in planning content and for adults to take a role in just supporting the framework”*. For example, *“the operating culture in schools should be developed so that the engagement of children and young people is supported and the skills of democratic influencing are practised during everyday school work”*. This involves *“pupils and students getting a real opportunity to influ-*

ence their school community and the influencing opportunities being expanded when the children get older”.

According to the discussion participants, schools and early childhood education play a crucial role in democracy education. One participant said that *“everything is based on the maintenance and teaching of civilisation, which means that educational institutions play the key role – we must hold on to our high-quality education system and invest in it”*. The discussions highlighted participatory methods as the pedagogic approach that promotes democracy. Learning democracy is closely linked to adopting skills related to working together. According to the participants, it is important that schools experiment with different ways to engage in common matters, so that everyone can find their own way. At the same time, it is possible to explain *“why something did not go as the young person hoped”*, since *“accepting disappointments is also one very important democratic skill”*.

Schools are seen as especially important in strengthening the foundations of children in the most vulnerable position. One participant said *“if such thinking is not present at home or within the family, I hope that schools will have the resources to drive forward this important message of democratic values”*. Another said *“if we know how political participation and commitment are inherited within the primary family, safeguarding growing children’s political commitment is a rather good investment in democratic culture, as is the engagement and preservation of it in the decades to come”*.

At the same time, it is *“important to emphasise in schools how vulnerable democracy is”*. Vulnerability makes us consider the sufficiency of democracy education. The participants were wondering *“to what extent the content of democracy education is included in the curriculum and does it include education that increases voter turnout?”* However, not all the burden should be placed on schools. The participants pointed

out that, in addition to schools, associations also have an important role *“as the educator of civic engagement skills and protectors of democracy”*.

But, there is a paradox in the democratic engagement of children and young people: *“democracy is legislatively intended for adults only”* and, therefore, children are *“excluded from democracy”*. Young people are a group whose participation and passivity raise special concern among the participants: *“It is disturbing to see the voter turnouts; will young people vote in the future?”* On the other hand, *“especially for young people, voting may not be the crown of democracy”*.

The discussion participants believe that *“most young people have opinions, for example, about something that bothers them. They do not think that nothing matters. They just don’t have energy to influence, or it feels embarrassing; there should be different ways to say things and participate”*. However, the climate change debate, for example, proves that *“young people are interested, take action and want to influence, but it is not always visible”*. Many participants thought that *“a young person aged 15–16 years may have felt that influencing is impossible, that their opinions do not matter. Opinions should be asked at an earlier stage, so that children would grow up to be brave”*.

The participants hoped that decision-makers would co-operate more with, for example, youth councils. Children and young people should have an opportunity to *“make choices and influence decisions through municipal politics, just as municipal governments and local councils do, for example”*. On the other hand, *“it is possible that only young people who are already popular, successful and skilled in speaking are elected to youth councils, leaving the quieter, shier ones in the background. Their voices should also be heard”*. This would require *“engagement skills from decision-makers and employees”* and enough resources, time and competence. It is a societal value choice to invest in democracy engaging everyone.

Opportunities to influence of those in a vulnerable position

“When your life is in balance, it is easier to participate in democracy,” said one of the participants. The participants noticed that people in a vulnerable position or challenging situation in their life *“have fewer opportunities to influence democratic decision-making and discussions”*. The COVID-19 pandemic *“mistreated those who already had difficulties in their lives”*.

This may lead to a situation in which the engagement of certain groups of people further deteriorates: *“The voices of those in the most vulnerable position are not heard.”* The role of people in a vulnerable position in society reveals something essential about the very nature of democracy, as *“a democratic system or any other form of government and administration is ultimately summed up by how people in a vulnerable position are treated”*.

If the needs of people in a vulnerable position are not comprehensively considered in society, this will have direct implications for the implementation of democracy. The discussion participants with disabilities highlighted that life is at times *“tiring and a continuous process of defending your fundamental rights”*, when you *“must repeat again and again that people with disabilities have the right to be heard”*. One discussion participant stated that *“if people with disabilities cannot easily participate in education, working life or different areas of life, it’s hard for them to influence”*. Another participant continued asking *“how could we make everyone understand that different vulnerabilities are a normal part of life and we have to get everyone involved”*.

The discussion participants highlighted the lack of understanding of many societal stakeholders: *“for example, people with severe disabilities have the same degree of dignity and their opinions are not being heard; there should be time and means to hear them”*. Such

shortcomings shed light on the state of democracy: *“whose voice is being heard and listened to?”*, *“is only the loudest voice heard?”* and *“how do we observe the voices and signals that are covered or hidden?”*

Immigrants – in the margins of society?

The participants from immigrant backgrounds had varied experiences of opportunities to connect to Finnish society. For some, Finland seemed a strong democratic country, and elections in particular provide a concrete experience of equal citizenship: *“I have lived in Finland for three years and I can already vote in elections. It amazes me. I was impressed when the invitation letter to vote in the municipal elections came in Finnish, Swedish, Arabic, English and Russian. I felt that it was an invitation that was sent to me personally.”*

Some of the young immigrant participants felt that they live in two different societies and must follow two different sets of values. They were concerned about the strict attitudes towards different values, and they wanted more respect between different kinds of people. The young participants also wished that they could express themselves on the basis of their own values.

The themes of exclusion and social exclusion also came up in the dialogues. *“Whatever the definition of a nation is, we immigrants are excluded. We are not citizens of this country”*, stated one participant. The discussion participants also pointed out how the legislation concerning immigration describes the state of democracy in an immigrant’s perspective: *“I don’t have similar opportunities, so this is not very democratic for me.”* One participant characterised the problem as follows: *“Democracy is a system that guarantees certain rights for all citizens as equals, but we are excluded from citizenship. This is why we consider democracy as a privilege.”*

In practice, experiences of exclusion and incomplete citizenship may mean, for example, challenges related to residence permits, the impossibility of finding work corresponding to your skills and continuous insecurity about your own future or that of your family. These problems increase the burden, which is already increased by living in a foreign country and in an unfamiliar society. “*Since I’m not from a European country, I have even more problems*”, stated one participant.

Limiting rights on the basis of someone’s background is regarded as violence: “*Violence may be personal, structural and cultural*”. According to one participant, “*integration programmes teach how foreigners should behave or be like Finns*”. However, we might ask whether the challenge in a democracy, which aims for the equality of all people, should be mutual?

Multi-species coexistence in democracy

“How are the animal rights implemented in democracy?”

Some dialogues questioned the human-centric nature of democracy and called for the rights of animals and multi-species community in democracy. This reflection stems from the new ways of thinking about the status of humans in the world where our activities threaten the existence of other

species. Understanding humans as part of a multi-species community means that democracy should evolve accordingly.

According to the participants, democracy may also mean that “*other species must have the same right to exist as we humans*”. From this perspective, animals, for example, should be considered when developing democracy, as “*by defending a small animal, we can grasp what is valuable, what is democracy, what is a nation*”. Democracy is comprehensively linked to the well-being of the multi-species community: “*an individual cannot thrive if the multi-species community is not thriving*”.

Democracy that goes beyond human-centricity requires “*an increase of systematic thinking and identification of interdependences. Then, we also make visible how our own well-being is dependent on the well-being of others and our environment*.” Democratic coexistence in a multi-species community “*provides a new viewpoint on how we think and should think about the use and treatment of forests, water areas and animals*”.

One participant said that we may have “*teachers closer to us than we think if we only could identify and recognise the value of coexistence from the outside-the-box perspective and beyond the human-centric world*”. For some participants, this means “*applying of an age-old wisdom*” as well as knowledge and living habits that are connected to nature. In the light of these approaches, the borders of democracy are not given or final, but they change over time when we learn new things about the world around us and our diverse nature.

6 Democracy under threat

Democracy Defence Dialogues naturally also addressed threats to democracy. The participants were aware that democracy is not born or maintained by itself, but requires efforts. The most significant threats targeted at democracy mentioned were the passivity of people, the impacts of plutocracy in society, the lack of accessibility and openness of decision-making, society's development towards authoritarianism and crises.

Democracy is challenging, imperfect and unfinished

"It's hard to try to be democratic."

The discussions held both in Finland as well as abroad noted that, regardless of its virtues, democracy is not easy. One participant even called democracy *"painful"*. This is primarily related to the reconciliation of different views and resulting disputes and conflicts. Furthermore, democracy is often slow and, at times, complicated. It requires time, listening and hearing, trust-building and societal structures that support engagement. Solving matters together among a big group of people and in accordance with the jointly agreed rules is not easy or quick.

In the dialogues, the difficult nature and incompleteness of democracy were seen, on one hand, as facts that we must accept and, on the other hand, as a challenge related to the continuous development of democracy. One young discussion participant stated that *"my father and one of my teachers have said that democracy is not necessarily a good thing, but it is the best of the poor alternatives*

developed". At the same time, many participants were concerned that in Finland *"we feel overly comfortable about our social stability"* in which *"democracy is taken for granted"*. Democracy *"is not Mount Everest which you have to climb to the top – and there you are, you have reached the top – and now everything will stay the same forever"*.

Several discussions noted that democracy will never be complete; it is more like *"an ideal that may never be fully reached, but it is a good goal"* and something *"for which we must work hard all the time"*. We must continuously promote people's opportunities to participate and influence: *"although I believe in representative democracy, it is essential that we develop new ways for people to participate in their daily lives, for example, in discussions and that we emphasise the important issues that require change."* According to one discussion participant: *"thresholds should be lowered and hinges lubricated."*

The participants believe generally that *"democratic values system, freedom, fairness and equality – these are big things"*. One discussion stated that *"when you are promoting education, dialogue, encounters, solidarity, responsibility, reasonability, sustainability and hope, you are also promoting democracy"*.

Passivity of people – cause and effect of poorly functioning democracy

Participants in most dialogues were concerned about democracy deteriorating due to the passivity of people: *"It is not always easy to defend democracy, sometimes it is easier to be a bystander."* Passivity was deemed to be caused by several different

aspects. *“For some people, it is a natural way of behaving; they trust that others will take care of everything and they do not have to get involved in most things,”* said one participant. On the other hand, *“some people think that when things are going pretty well, there is no need to get involved”*. The passivity of people may also be nurtured by the fact that *“an individual-centric consumer mode prevails in Finland and people do not recognise their own role as a social stakeholder”*. One participant even asked *“whether the worst threat to democracy in Finland is the lack of meaning, boredom?”*

Social participation can be prevented if someone feels that *“participation is of no use”*. One participant has *“friends who have given up promoting common interests, for example, in local politics, since they felt that it is an excessively slow way to get things moving”*. While on the other hand, some matters seem so big that an individual’s opportunities to influence seem non-existent: *“You can’t actually influence bigger things, like sanctions.”* Sometimes, the problem lies in the fact that *“if your own resources are scarce, your energy goes to fixing yourself and you don’t have energy to do anything greater for society”*.

Many discussions showed concern about the fact that *“democracy gets weaker as feelings of exclusion strengthen in people’s minds”*. Many participants are aware that *“those who feel excluded from the decision-making system do not participate”*. For example, *“marginal groups, which do not get representation, get frustrated”*.

However, actions should be taken to combat the passivity of people. The discussions noted that *“for strengthening democracy, it is important for everyone to be involved on a local level and the views of those who have experienced inequality and marginalisation to be considered”*. One participant suggested that democracy could be protected by paying special attention to *“groups of people who are still at some level connected to*

democracy, but on the edge and about to fall by the wayside”.

As a prerequisite for engagement, *“livelihood should be in order first. And, there should be some kind of a community that supports. Finally, people should be able to be part of the decision-making concerning them”*. One discussion stated that *“how and how well information about concrete influencing opportunities and routes reaches different people is important when building engagement”*. The prevention of passivity has many levels and requires a wide range of different means.

Power of money and economic inequality weaken the power of people

Some discussion participants worried about the power of economy and money in the functioning of democracy: *“Money talks and dictates how society works.”* These discussion participants felt that *“democracy has been played down by plutocracy”* as *“things move forward largely driven by economy, and democracy is forgotten”*. On the one hand, economy dictates what kind of decisions are made. On the other hand, the lack of resources weakens the operating preconditions of the democratic system. This means, for example, that *“it is easier not to comply with legislation if there is not enough money to comply with it”*.

Emphasis on the economic aspects in society raised concern about *“whether the current well-being indicators, which prioritise financial and material well-being, prevent democracy?”* The participants hoped that *“money will not be valued too much in decision-making, but the health of people, mutual well-being and the environment will be prioritised instead of economics”*.

The uneven distribution of economic resources is also a threat to democracy. The

amount of wealth often correlates with greater political influence. One participant was worried that *“large companies get support from the members of municipal council easily and push through their own decisions”*. Others were concerned about the power exercised by multinational companies or their leaders: *“is the power exercised by these people still within the control of democratic systems?”* The power of extremely rich people is also visible on a global level in which all people’s lives can be affected by *“a guy who buys Twitter because he does not like its moderation practices”*.

Remoteness and secrecy of decision-making increase distrust

Several discussions called for more openness in decision-making. Openness is needed on many fronts from the funding of political stakeholders to the background of individual decisions. *“All election campaign financing should be public,”* one participant commented. *“The decision proposal is often provided a couple of days before the deciding meeting, so there is no time for public discussion,”* pointed out another participant. According to one participant, *“if you are elected to Parliament, it will finally dumb you down and remould you, even if you had your own opinions before you went there. Party discipline changes people and creates distrust.”* Simultaneously, other participants wondered whether *“things can really be pushed forward if there is no party discipline of some kind?”*

It is hard for people to exercise their power if many key elements of politics are kept in the dark. One discussion participant said that it is not real democracy that *“people only get to elect the Members of Parliament every four years and then just see how it goes for four years”*. One discussion also stated

that *“people vote again in new elections thinking that there will be a change, although, in reality, the opportunities of democratically elected governments to implement their economic policies in accordance with their ideologies are rather limited in practice”*. Especially in crises, it might be difficult for the decision-makers to *“make short-term decisions that require great efforts from people if they have to pay a very high price for these decisions in terms of backing in the following elections”*.

Some participants felt that the decision-making process in society is too hierarchical or elitist: *“The gap between the grassroots level and the higher level of decision-making is currently too wide.”* The remoteness of decision-making is concretely visible in that the voice of normal people is not being heard in political discussions: *“Issues are often discussed between such high-ranking people that an ordinary individual cannot participate in these discussions.”* One participant described how *“power is there at the top and you should get there, and there are different gatekeepers, selection processes and criteria for getting into a position where you can use power”*. According to some discussion participants, *“populism has tried to change people’s feelings that you can’t change anything by voting.”* Paradoxically, this has also made many parties cautious about their stands and, thereby, increased the vagueness of politics in people’s minds.

Misinformation, confrontation and lack of trust erode public discussion

The dialogues also addressed true and false information and how efforts are made to influence us through them. Some participants expressed their worries about *“disinformation being used to instigate interesting end*

results in democracy". The ruthless use of false information is a threat incorporated into democracy, as democracy that cherishes open discussions may also "*expose us to manipulation and to the fact that simplifying opinions gets votes*".

The situation will get worse when people become distanced from each other. Many participants felt that precisely "*people feeding confrontation are the ones that get their voices easily heard*". The United States is regarded as a worrying example of where intensifying polarisation, i.e. the exacerbation of differences between groups of people, may lead. The participants felt that this is a threat to democracy "*if an atmosphere of suspicions in which all facts are under speculation is born*".

An increasingly digital society also generates new kinds of threats to democratic discussions. Concerns arise also from "*algorithm-based echo chambers and attention mechanisms*" created by technology and media companies as "*social media reinforces both good and bad*". At worst, social media discussion is seen as simplifying the complex reality we are living in. At the same time, it distorts social relations and people's self-understanding: "*Social media weakens the ability to understand contexts and act in society. Communitarity vanishes when you can only hear your own voice on social media.*"

In addition, media's role as the watchdog of power is not realised if "*people are not interested in political issues, but rather in gossip stories in which politicians are seen as fair game*". Untruthful public discussion and polarisation make it increasingly hard to take care of common matters.

Hate mail and online shaming, or the threat of them, have made some of the participants carefully consider how much and in what way they want to be visible in social media and how to behave there. Democracy is eroded if "*people who would*

like to influence do not dare to enter politics or tell their opinions". The discussion participants have witnessed, for example, mud-slinging targeted at young female politicians, which aimed to silence them, and heard climate researchers' careful consideration on how to communicate their research results. If such instances become more frequent, this "*may be fatal to open administration and atmosphere which, I hope, will be fostered in this country for a long time*". In order to fix the public discussion eroding democracy we need "*safe places to take action in media*".

"It is a challenge that people are so different: I feel, in a way, that I'm not very brave in voicing my own opinions. But, if the atmosphere is such that all thoughts are really accepted and there is an opportunity to discuss them, it is easier and then the issues are addressed in a variety of ways."

Increasing distrust in public discussion will ultimately be also targeted at political decision-making and administration. "*If people don't trust the information provided by the administration, how much this will give power to misinformation and disinformation,*" wondered one participant. Society following good democratic and administrative principles and civil rights cannot "*respond in kind*" to the provocative actions of dictatorships twisting the truth, "*as we would lose everything we are defending*". How can democracy withstand these new threats?

Democratic values are put to a test in crises

Many dialogues considered what will happen to democracy during crises, such as the present pandemic and war. In crises, a balance between the security of the entire nation and the protection of the rights of the individuals must be sought. One discussion said that *“democracy also includes the limiting of rights in order to prioritise the common good”*. One participant stated that *“if there is a war, I accept that our communications and decision-making will become undemocratic for the duration of the war. It might not be wise to fight against a dictatorship so that every gunshot is voted for”*.

Crises are testing many of the basic democratic values. *“During crises, marginalisation and inequality increase rather than decrease.”* At the same time, crises may strengthen non-democratic values and, for example, *“push culture in a more militaristic direction”*. Some participants feel that the effects of the war in Ukraine, especially security policy, leave no room for other important topics: *“Where are our soft values when society wants to have guns on the borders? What are we really defending when there is no longer art and culture?”* Other participants had observed how *“Finnish nationalism also uses culture for the purposes of increasing insecurity”*.

The discussions participants noted that *“there is no perfect, democratic and fair crisis management model. Unfortunately, someone will make the decisions, and we have to settle for that.”* In spite of this, the participants hoped that, even in these situations, the grounds and consequences of the decisions *“must be openly brought to the discussion related to the crisis”*. This safeguards democracy even in situations in which broader engagement is not possible. However, it seems that we do not yet know how the current crises will ultimately shape our democracy.

A counterforce for dictatorship and war

“The opposite of democracy is oppression. Democracy means getting rid of oppression.”

Democracy Defence Dialogues were organised in response to the concerns over the state of democracy arising from Russia’s war of aggression, and this was also reflected in the content of the discussions. For many participants, democracy is seen as *“a counterforce to such activities that the Russian attack on Ukraine represents”*. One participant described how *“now that this war has begun, I have understood everything – that democracy is very valuable and that I’m ready to do all it takes to preserve democracy”*.

The discussions stated that *“defending democracy means to be against wars”*, since *“the threshold to start a war is lower in authoritarian countries where a small circle of people can send other people to die”*. The participants said that *“too much power vested in one person is always a hazard to the nation”*. According to the participants, democracy is specified as a counterforce for all kinds of oppressions, authoritarianism and dictatorship.

Some discussions considered how democracy differs from authoritarianism, which sometimes even seems appealing. Recognising all the benefits is sometimes challenging. The discussion participants know that democratic decision-making may be slow and burdensome, but this also protects us: *“so that we will not take the authoritarian direction just because the slowness of masses is holding us back.”* One participant described the situation as follows: *“When someone is giving the orders and others obey – this is quick. We just have to accept that we need to allow time for things*

that are important in the light of democracy.” Another participant remarked that patience, above all, is what we need in democracy: *“The stiffness of our institution is also a benefit, so that we can’t change everything in a split second.”*

Our small country could *“punch above its weight in democracy,”* was a wish presented in the discussions. Some participants remind us

that *“Finns often think that everyone wants to have a similar democracy to Finland’s”*. This should not be the presumption and *“there are many countries which do not want to have a democratic administration model”*. Afghanistan is used as an example of a situation in which *“building democracy may lead to a catastrophe”*. Democracy is not a panacea, which will solve all the problems.



Figure 2. Threats to democracy outlined in the discussions.

7 We all can defend democracy

Almost all the dialogues explored the means to defend democracy. The state of democracy in Finland was regarded as good in general, but this is not a reason for being passive. There are multiple threat scenarios and democratic development may rapidly turn in an unfavourable direction. Therefore, democracy must be strengthened, defended and renewed on several fronts at the same time. This requires the ability to address challenging issues and receive different experiences and views. In a diverse and multicultural society, attention must be paid to language and reading skills, knowledge and the understandability of matters. It must be ensured that the mutual trust between people will not be eroded, but thrive instead. When faced with these challenges, many participants were pleased that they had found different ways to act in order to strengthen democracy and renew democracy in their own environments.

Developing our ability to see eye-to-eye and deal with differences

“Democracy provides a framework, but does not give any guarantees, unless we choose to take advantage of our opportunities to listen to each other.”

The social discussion atmosphere and discussion culture raised concerns in almost all areas of life among the dialogue participants. Some participants felt that *“politeness has somehow vanished from today’s discus-*

sions” and respect for other people *“should be restored”*. Especially *“political discussions seem really harsh and ugly to a layperson”*. When discussions are heated, many people become cautious and decide not to participate. This means that only the voices of the most pointed discussion participants are heard.

Pluralism and diversity are now needed in social discussions. Many participants feel that *“my family and friends include a lot of people who are similar to me, which creates an illusion that everyone thinks in the same way”*. Reaching consensus with people with different thoughts may feel surprising and challenging. Therefore, it might even be more worthwhile to *“discuss contentious issues together”*. An excellent foundation for this could be created by teaching interaction skills already in school and early childhood education: *“teaching interaction skills also means teaching democracy skills and promoting democracy.”*

Good discussions help in removing boundaries. The participants also had positive experiences in that *“when people genuinely discuss and encounter one another, boundaries will be removed, rough edges will smoothed out and trust and mutual receptiveness created”*. Examples of a successful increase in diversity and its benefits are offered, for example, by businesses which *“have understood the benefits of diversity as well as its positive impacts on productivity”*.

However, some participants were worried that people do not have enough concrete shared places to meet and discuss: *“understanding often requires meeting face to face.”* One discussion pointed out that understanding does not happen as easily as the differentiation of groups of people but *“requires proactivity from us in order to create listening*

encounters and space for talking about emotions”. One participant asked: “why are we talking about ‘we’, ‘they’ or ‘them’? How could we just be ‘we’?” The dialogues underlined a need for places and situations in which people could meet each other across different social dividing lines.

Diversity creates also challenges. Some participants remarked that “it is a huge challenge for a democratic society to integrate people from extremely different environments and cultures under a tight schedule”. One participant stated that “I am of the opinion that we must have the right to say that something is just not allowed in our society”.

Some participants were pondering identity issues: “If the promotion of rights through certain groups or identities are constantly increasing, how could we take care of our common matters?” One discussion participant said that “I can see the social

significance of identity issues. But, when people come to discuss them with loaded guns – which is historically understandable – will this take the issue forward?” Some participants felt that, due to the identity policy, “one democratic cornerstone – hearing everyone’s voice and searching for a shared solution – is suddenly missing from discussions”. They find it problematic if one discussion participant “does not accept the other person’s view as part of the discussion, and thinks that their own righteous objectives override everything else”.

In addition to places for discussions, an open attitude in encountering unfamiliar and challenging views is required from people. However, people should not let challenges paralyse discussions, which require braveness and flexibility from all parties.

DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS’ METHODS

FOR ENCOUNTERING DIFFERENCES

- teaching interactive skills
- creating shared places for discussions
- involving different people and paying attention to diversity
- allocating time for meeting and listening
- daring also to grasp challenging topics and different experiences

Expanding our ways of engaging and influencing

“Ways of influencing and participating should be clear and designed and proportioned humanly.”

A democratic society consists of a wide range of different people in different situations in life. For this reason, people should be offered a wide selections of different methods to participate in discussions concerning common matters and influencing them. For example, it was suggested that voting could take place online, as “for young people and immigrants, it is a natural way of taking care of things. And, why not for older people as well. How easy would it be to open your laptop instead for queuing for half an hour?”

Many dialogues noted that the ways of engagement and influencing should be further expanded. They should be incorporated into the everyday lives of people, and it should also be ensured that minorities can participate in their preferred ways. It is especially important that influencing and participation work be done together with the groups of people concerned. This means that *“grassroots-level issues should be spelled out for decision-makers as well as solution alternatives and how participation and equality can be realised”*.

At the same time, efforts should be made to involve persons who, for one reason or another, are at risk of being excluded. *“A Sami woman was invited by the principal, and the parents’ association had a respectful attitude towards this woman, since she was invited by the principal. Could this be also the*

practice in a residents’ association?” wonders one participant about their experiences of the parents’ association.

Strengthening engagement and influencing in society does not always mean creation of new official “participation methods”. A lot could be achieved by developing the current public services to pay better attention to people’s own experiences and views on their own life situation and possible needs for support. The immigrant participants in particular had strong negative experiences of using the public services: *“all these battles with the system, when you try to use the services of Kela, TE Offices...”*. Everyone should be able to feel democratic citizenship when using the services of employment offices, social welfare offices and health centres.

DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS’ METHODS

FOR STRENGTHENING ENGAGEMENT

- incorporation of influencing into the everyday lives of people and services
- developing ways of influencing and influencing channels together with people
- identifying those at risk of being excluded and inviting them actively to participate
- paying attention to the needs of minorities

Language, knowledge and understanding encourage engagement

“When I arrived in Europe, I thought that I could say what I want. But, I can’t say anything as I don’t speak the local language.”

Reading and language skills play a crucial role in democracy. Lack of language skills creates several challenges for democratic participation, as influencing starts with understanding. *“How can we influence when we don’t know the language so we can’t understand others and express ourselves?”* asked one discussion participant. Another participant described the same thing: *“Democracy not only means voting. It also means, for example, an opportunity to understand. Understanding the language is necessary for being able to participate.”*

Language is also crucial in getting your voice heard. *“It is always best to express yourself in your own native language,”* stated the participants. Regardless, *“everyone should have an opportunity to achieve such a level of language skills that will enable you to take care of your things and participate and understand”*. One discussion suggested that public agencies should have interpreters who speak several languages and *“multilingualism must also cover sign language”*.

The changing world and society demand constant learning from people: *“everyone should also have the opportunity to get more information and develop themselves, to develop their knowledge and competence.”* Many public services, such as the library services, play a key role in this: *“The basic task of a library is to provide more extensive cultural knowledge when compared with, for example, the commercial offering. Libraries offer an opportunity to familiarise yourself with things from different perspectives, and it is important for people to expand their views.”*

Reading skills, which are crucial elements of democracy, can be understood holistically: *“Can you reconcile, perceive and understand?”* This means that reading skills include critical thinking skills, media literacy and audiovisual literacy. It is important for people to understand, for example, *“how media is organised, what are the issues concerning freedom of speech and what can and cannot be said”*.

Trustworthy information is needed in our world of misinformation and disinformation. The statistics professionals participating in the discussions characterised their work as *“the cornerstone of democracy”*. They told us how *“statistics enable democratic decision-making that is based on correct*

information and also highlight the pitfalls of democracy”. The mere existence of information does not, however, guarantee its usefulness in terms of democracy. People and decision-makers must have access to information and understand the nature of information. The better the availability and usability of information, the more useful it will be in societal discussions and *“the better the civil society’s areas are functioning, the easier it is to make decisions”*.

Research-based information acts also as the counterforce to disinformation: *“The more we have correct information available, the less room there is for lies.”* The researchers who participated in the dialogues emphasise that information is the key to hearing the voices of those in a vulnerable position in social discussions and decision-making.

The professionals working in museums, archives and libraries who participated in the dialogues highlighted the meaning of historical understanding: *“Remembering the historical facts is very important when we want to avoid the mistakes made in the past.”* The participants working with archives stated that *“in Finland, history is well recorded and we are used to it – but this is not the case all around the world”*. The participants working in the museum sector said how *“the collective memory built by the museum institution protects and safeguards.”* The participants have followed with horror how cultural heritage is being destroyed in wars and conflicts: *“destroying cultural heritage is a crime against humanity.”* For the sake of truth and fairness, democracies must also ensure that the past events are not distorted. This means that history must also include the war crimes and violence committed by Finns.

DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS' METHODS

FOR STRENGTHENING UNDERSTANDING

- strengthening people's learning, information retrieval, reading and critical thinking skills
- supporting the language learning and multilingualism of both the majority of the population as well as immigrants
- producing research-based information to support understanding and decision-making
- reinforcing historical and cross-generational understanding
- cherishing the cultural heritage of nations and groups of people

Trust is capital that can be increased

“Leading by example is the best way to build trust.”

Reinforcing trust between people, communities as well as within society more extensively is crucial in defending democracy. The participants see that *“trust between different people is a prerequisite for democracy”* and that *“without social trust, democracy is quite impossible”*. Many participants hoped that *“they can call Finland a society of trust in the future”*.

One of the elements creating trust is institutions, which in Finland have proven to be functional and trustworthy, for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Experiences of unfairness have the most severe eroding impact on the trust in authorities and, thereby, society: *“if, for example, a young immigrant has lots of unfair experiences, this erodes the trust in authorities and, ultimately, in the entire civil society.”*

One participant said that *“if the authorities cannot be trusted, this is one of the biggest threats to democracy”*. Another participant describes the same thing: *“The way that state administration and legislation are performed in people's everyday lives is essential for trust capital, and this is the long-term foundation to build on.”* In other words, people's experience of fairness and equality are the necessary foundation of a democratic society at all levels.

Trust can be created and reinforced by relentlessly striving to *“share our thoughts as well as listening to and reaching consensus with others”*. Everyone can build trust in their own daily life, for example, at home and in the workplace. Dialogue is one trust-building tool in all kinds of communities. People engaging in dialogical discussions learn to understand each other despite the differences and various views. For example, in working communities many people long for *“encounters and discussion events where everyone is heard, instead of just implementing changes within a small group”*.

DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS' METHODS**FOR REINFORCING TRUST**

- building a culture in which thoughts are shared in different communities –from workplaces to social institutions – and creating shared understanding
- meeting each other regardless of the differences and evoking interest towards the differences
- cherishing fairness and equality and assessing their realisation from the everyday life to social structures
- promoting dialogue in all kinds of communities and different sectors or society

8 The meaning of democracy dialogue now and in the future



“Genuine dialogue creates new insights, ideas and trust, which strengthen democracy and engagement.”

The value of democracy and free civil society is especially relevant in times of crisis. The Democracy Defence Dialogues can be seen as part of national resilience in circumstances where a global pandemic was followed by a global security crisis. The dia-

logues provided people with opportunities to get together to constructively discuss their experiences and views on democracy. Gathering together, listening to others and thinking about issues deeply are all part of the democratic way of life. At the same time, the dialogues produced valuable experience-based knowledge on how people across Finland, and elsewhere around the world, are attached to democracy and what their views are with regard to the current state of democracy.

“This discussion should be continued by everyone and everywhere – around the world and in different communities – there is no such place where this discussion could not or should not be continued in order to bring out new and different views.”

Some organisers stated that *“the global political climate had a strong impact on us wanting to organise the dialogue”*. Some of the discussions concentrated on *“influencing locally and local democracy, which were more affected by local phenomena than the global situation”*. Different views on democracy were connected by the fact that the theme was seen as topical and meaningful in a new way. Most of the organisers thought that there is also need for democracy discussions in the future.

The Democracy Defence Dialogues are also one means to strengthen democracy *“and concretise all things related to it”*. Democracy will weaken if people do not perceive it as something that exists in their own everyday life. In addition to acting in political systems and using different ways of influencing, we need more understanding of a democratic way of life, which implements the values of equality, freedom and fairness in different communities – from families and neighbourhoods to schools and workplaces all the way to the highest decision-making. The core of a democratic way of life is people’s ability to discuss common matters and act together: *“Doing things together, encountering others; that’s the key of democracy.”*

By doing things together, discussing and encountering others, we are building trust which reinforces the individual’s feeling of participation within society. The trust created through dialogue helps in strengthening the ability of our society to overcome crises, as well as combating threats targeted at democracy and hybrid threats aimed at eroding democracy by creating distrust and disruption.

“These kinds of dialogues give people the feeling of belonging to a community, and inspire them to take real actions to promote democracy.”

Democratic society is a living and developing entity. The more comprehensively we can engage different kinds of people and a plurality of voices in the discussion, the better we are equipped to defend democracy now and in the future.

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