

# The Handbook of Democratic Encounters

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**NATIONAL  
DIALOGUES**

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# Summary

Democracy must be continuously defended, strengthened, and renewed. This handbook is for people who wish to strengthen democracy through their actions or work. It focuses on democratic encounters – the moments and situations when democratic values are made concrete in the various spheres of daily life and society.

The handbook draws on the material originated in the *Democracy Defence Dialogues* held in spring 2022. The material outlined a key field of social action in which the majority of people living in Finland encounter the democratic state, namely the extensive public services of our society.

This handbook is primarily aimed at professionals working in public services. The democratic nature of the encounters that arise in their work, supports the achievement of the intended impact of services. The perception of one’s own work as something that enhances people’s democratic experience of society can also give meaning to the professionals.

The first part of the handbook introduces the reader to the two ‘cornerstones’ of democracy: equality and freedom. These core values of democracy are linked to everyday encounters, citing both the classic works as well as the participants in the *Democracy Defence Dialogues*.

The second part discusses the four ‘lifelines’ identified in the *Democracy Defence Dialogues*. These lifelines refer to themes that broadly affect different areas of our society and which were characterised by the dialogue participants as important for the functioning of democracy and whose vitality they are concerned about. The lifelines identified are inclusion, trust, knowledge, and justice. The handbook describes why these lifelines are crucial for the vitality of democracy, how they link people’s lives with state institutions, and the role that public services can play in strengthening them.

The third part presents six ‘steps’ for democratic encounters. These are practical approaches that can be applied to strengthen the lifelines of democracy in various contexts where members of the public and professionals come together. They also address how we can sustain democratic encounters as services become increasingly digitalised. The steps are based on the suggestions made by the participants in the *Democracy Defence Dialogues* on how to strengthen democracy, and we have refined the suggested practices to apply them to encounters in public services.

Finally, we consider the future of democracy. We can see challenging questions ahead. How do we deal with the growing gaps between different societies? How do we steer democracy and enable democratic encounters amidst the uncertainty created by global crises? What might democratic encounters mean in relation to the other living beings on our shared planet?

# 1. Introduction

This handbook is written to you who want to strengthen democracy in your own life and work. The past years have made it clear that democracy cannot be taken for granted. Instead, it requires continuous defending, strengthening, and renewing. One way to reinforce democracy are democratic encounters. These refer to those moments and situations in our everyday life that concretise democratic values in different fields of society.

We focus specifically on the encounters in various public services. These encounters can either strengthen or degenerate democracy because they play a crucial role in shaping the citizens' immediate experience of a society. We believe that these encounters taking place in public services include a significant, yet dormant, possibility of strengthening democracy in our societies.

Democratic encounters make services more effective because they enable flexible and creative ways of combining the knowledge and skills of professionals and ordinary citizens. These kinds of encounters also strengthen trust. At its best, the trust in a single public authority or in public services can grow into a general trust towards the entire society. Democratic encounters therefore initiate and maintain circles of trust, that radiate everywhere in people's lives.

The launching event for this handbook was Russia's attack in Ukraine in February 2022. The start of a massive war in Europe forced us to re-evaluate many aspects of our societies. It seemed obvious that we had underestimated the growth of powers that undermine democracy, as well as their efforts to expand across our own continent. The ruthless acts of war by the authoritarian Russia and the heroic defence of the democracy-oriented Ukraine demonstrates clearly

– at least momentarily – two different societal systems with different values.

This rare moment of clarity sheds light on the condition of democracy in other places in Europe. In their activities within our European societies, Russia and other authoritarian countries have succeeded in planting here money acquired through corruption and used to perpetuating it, spreading propaganda that is based on lies and spreads cynicism, as well as bolstering actors that threaten democracy both on the far-right and the far-left.

Awakening into the situation forced us in Finland and other places in Europe to look into the mirror and ask ourselves difficult questions: Why have our societies submitted to undemocratic developments? What truly is the state of our democracy? How could we strengthen and defend democracy in Finland, Europe, and other places in the world? If Ukrainians were ready to give up their lives for their country and its democratic future, what should we do on our own front?

Awakened by these questions and concerns, we launched in a wide collaboration the [Democracy Defence Dialogues](#). This was a series of dialogical conversations open for everyone, to which people of all backgrounds were invited to discuss the state of democracy in the Finnish society. Any organization, group or individual citizen could join in.

During the Spring of 2022, we organized 71 dialogues, where over 500 people from various backgrounds discussed their relationship to democracy. Based on these dialogues and the notes provided by the dialogue organizers, we published a public summary. This summary gathered the central contents and point of views of the conversations. However, for this handbook, we decided

to take a deep dive into the dialogue materials specifically from the point of view of democratic encounters.

We wanted to examine further what *Democracy Defence Dialogues* taught us about the connections between a *democratic form of government* and a *democratic way of life* in the contemporary Finland. The first one of these (form of government) includes the institutions and practices of a democratically ruled country, whereas the latter (way of life) indicates people's everyday coexistence that sustains equality and freedom on all levels of society.

These two manifestations of democracy intertwine. The democratic form of government cannot function well without people who support democracy through their daily way of life. It has become equally clear that a democratic way of life is nearly impossible to realise in families, workplaces, schools, neighbourhoods, or past-time activities if it is not sheltered and supported by a democratic form of government.

Therefore, we aimed to find out how the participants of the dialogues described their relationship with democracy as a form of government as well as a way of life, and what kinds of connections seemed to be prevailing – or missing – between the two.

*Democracy Defence Dialogues* reinforced the conception that the people living in Finland felt that they are living in a genuine democracy and that many citizens trust the governmental actors. Alongside this picture, also another kind of story emerged. It brought out the citizens' increasing experiences of inequality, the cracks in trust in different areas of society, the uncertainty of the significance of knowledge in democracy, as well as the issue that a large group of people do not feel like they properly belong in the society.

We can fairly assume that these layers in people's experiences can be found in other democratic countries, as well. Under surface of the relatively well-operating democracies, powers vital to democracy are on the decline. We know from the events of many countries that these kinds of

factors make democracy vulnerable to attacks both from inside and outside.

Furthermore, when we analysed and compared the lived experiences of democracy that people described in the dialogues, we were able to identify an important field of societal action where democratic form of government and democratic way of life joined in a significant way. This field is the *public services* of our society.

In Finland, the majority of people "encounter the state" precisely through the public services. Kindergartens, schools, health-care centres, social welfare offices, libraries, and the offices of the municipal and state agencies operate primarily through public funding and their activity is guided by legislation. People come to these places to learn, seek guidance and support as well as receive help and care in diverse everyday life situations. In the services, citizens typically encounter educated professionals who bring jointly created and combined intellectual, skilled, and material resources at their disposal.

Based on our analysis, people's experiences of these encounters varied significantly. A school, a social welfare office or, for example, an employment agency could provide the citizen an experience of a society where everyone's case is important, and where situations are solved together respecting and listening to every party. At the same time, people also reported facing disdain, inequality, distrust, and obscurity of knowledge in those very same public services.

In the light of this observation, it seemed obvious that the public services shaped many people's *experiences of society* in a fundamental way. It also seemed that most professionals – teachers, doctors, nurses, social workers, bureau officials or, for example, police officers – working in these services do not identify themselves as *democratic actors* affecting these kinds of societal experiences. The realisation of a democratic way of life in public services and its attachment to the vitality of a democratic state thus remains coincidental.

Society's public services, however, include massive opportunities to strengthen democracy.

This point of view is also supported by our earlier work and experiences in developing services, practices, and interaction in the Finnish public sector. Over 600 000 people in Finland work in the public sector. A significant part of them works precisely in the places where citizens encounter the state and their experiences of society are formed.

Many of these professionals encounter particularly those citizens who currently are in difficult life situations and in risk of being marginalised from the society. We can only imagine what kind of effects it would have if more and more encounters in the field of public services would strengthen each parties' positive experiences of a democratic society.

*"In welfare counties it is the services where the residents create their experience of whether the system is working democratically and whether they feel involvement."*  
**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

Thus, in this handbook, we want primarily to address public service professionals in kindergartens, schools, health-care centres, hospitals, social welfare offices, libraries, museums, and numerous bureaus. We acknowledge that in many of these services, professionals work with scarce resources and public service employees are often strained in their work. Therefore, we want to emphasize that democratic encounters are yet not another new demand applied on top of already full work schedule. Instead, it is rather an attitude of thinking and approaching the primary task of one's own work.

The more democratic encounters we have, the better the services are able to deliver the impacts that are expected from them: pupils learn better, patients get proper treatment and the social welfare offices can help people in difficult life situations to move forward. This is achieved when people encounter each other and can combine

their experiences, knowledge and skills guided by the ideals of a democratic way of life. To perceive one's own work as enabling experiences of democratic society can also give meaningful deepness to the work of various groups of public sector professionals.

*"Strengthening the internal democracy as a big organization. Participation and dialogue are important altogether as well as customer participation in the development of the services. We now have a somewhat weak connection to the core operations, and we could develop understanding and connection between core work and development and communication."*  
**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

In addition to professionals in the public sector, our message is also aimed at the actors in the third sector as well as various work communities who have similar opportunities to realise democracy in the everyday life. The handbook can also be utilized in many other contexts where people encounter each other in different life situations and roles, face to face and online. The thoughts we present apply also to the digital development of public services into functions widely serving various citizens.

*"Even though things happen online, if a public authority could be present and encounter the person, it is nevertheless an interactive channel, a different thing than a letter."*  
**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

The special strength of democracy, as a form of government as well as a way of life, is that it en-

ables creative co-operation and learning together, enhanced by equality and freedom. If we learn a better way of acting together in those numerous situations where the citizens encounter the state and the state encounters the citizens, our societies grow stronger. In addition, new possibilities may emerge, even entirely unpredictable ones.

The handbook is divided into three parts. In the first part, we introduce the two "cornerstones" of democracy: equality and freedom. In the second part, we describe the four "lifelines" of democracy we have identified in the *Democracy Defence Dialogues*. These lifelines – participation, trust, knowledge, and justice – are issues that the participants described as meaningful for the functioning of democracy and the vitality of which they were concerned about.

In the third part of the handbook, we present six "steps" to democratic encounters. These steps are practical ways of acting which, when appropriately applied, can strengthen the lifelines of democracy in different contexts where ordinary citizens and professionals encounter each other.

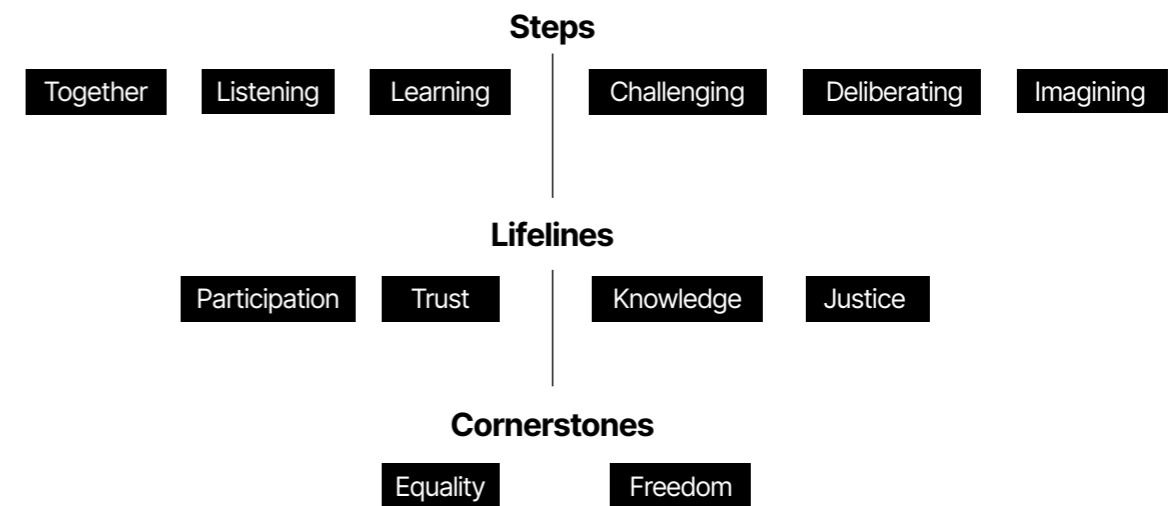
Lastly, we turn our gaze towards the future horizons of democracy and the challenges that we see arising there. How do we cope with the growing gaps between different societies? How do we steer democracy and enable democrat-

ic encounters in the uncertainty created by the global crises?

We deliberately use the word *citizen* in the text in the contexts where we usually talk about *clients, service users, pupils, or, for example, patients*. By citizen we mean all members of society regardless of their background, origin, or official citizenship status. Sometimes, simply thinking about one's own clients, pupils, patients, or colleagues as citizens can change the everyday situation at hand into a democratic encounter.

*"Citizenship comes from the experience that you belong in a community."*  
**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

The quotes we picked from the *Democracy Defence Dialogues* bring the voices of ordinary citizens and professionals working in public services into the narrative of this book. We bring these voices in a dialogue with quotes from the classics of democracy, which link our contemporary challenges into our long and valuable democratic heritage.



**Figure 1.** Cornerstones, lifelines and steps to strengthening democracy

## 2. Cornerstones

Democracy is based on the strive to treat all people equally and to maximize the freedom of each individual. What do equality and freedom ultimately mean? How are they realised in public services?

We start from the two pillars of democracy: equality and freedom. These are the most important values of democratic communities, and they can be pursued in all areas of society. Yet, we rarely halt to consider why equality and freedom are so inalienable to us, and which forces foster or hinder them in our lives. The ideals of equality and freedom should also ultimately guide our public services. It is therefore important to clarify how they can be put into practice in the encounters within services.



# Cornerstones

## Equality

*"It is true that we are called a democracy, for the administration is in the hands of the many and not of the few. But while there exists equal justice to all and alike in their private disputes, the claim of excellence is also recognized; and when a citizen is in any way distinguished, he is preferred to the public service, not as a matter of privilege, but as the reward of merit. Neither is poverty an obstacle, but a man may benefit his country whatever the obscurity of his condition."*

**- Thucydides: The History of the Peloponnesian War, c. 400 BC**

*"The first thought is that the quintessential idea of the very democracy is equality. Without it, we cannot talk about democracy. How do we nurture it?"*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

We humans differ from each other in our abilities, backgrounds, and life situations. This can put us in unequal positions in the society. Therefore, treating each other as equals is always a value-based choice, that is often forgotten. If we want equality, we must choose it and continue to renew this choice every day.

Why have some people wanted – and still want – equality? There are many reasons to this. For some, equality is a shelter against the attempts of the more powerful to control and benefit from them. For others, equality is something intrinsically valuable. The kind of life that feels like the best option is one where you can look others in the eye without anyone having to bow or yield. Some people think that human skills and creativity flourish best in a society where individuals are free to learn

from each other's differences without differences in gender, age, occupation, social class, or ethnic background coming between them.

Democracy can be seen as an attempt to create institutions and a way of life that make it easier for people to make choices that support equality, while protecting all citizens from attacks on their equality. These attacks come from within the societies as well as from the outside. Various economic, political, and ideological groups have always found and will continue to find ways to increase their power at the expense of others.

Many forces within individuals, groups, and the society as a whole drive people to suppress each other, treat others instrumentally and create hierarchies. The developmental psychology of the human individual can be seen as a long struggle from the efforts of a helpless little child to dominate others to the gradually developing ability to accept the equality of others. The acceptance of and respect for other people's independence can be seen as a developmental psychological achievement of individuals. For these kinds of achievements, there is a huge significance whether the surrounding society, including political institutions and local communities, supports the growth and continued efforts of each individual towards an equal coexistence.

Broadly construed, the history of humankind seems to be an endless continuum of various forms of suppression and hierarchies. As one hierarchy has fallen, another one has usually emerged to replace it. In the big picture of world history, the progression of equality is an exception, and the achievement of it is sort of a momentary triumph.

The recent years have shown that democracy seeking equality can begin to collapse even in countries where it has been strong for the longest time.

A democracy that seeks equality for all its citizens is always an ideal. It is hardly ever fully achievable. It can, however, be achieved in parts and gradually. This matters because every step towards a greater equality can bring other good things along. At the same time, the ideal of full equality is a yardstick by which we can critically examine our society and its practices.

Furthermore, the ideal can serve as a magnifying glass for each of our own lives. Will we keep pushing ourselves up again and again, even if we often stumble in our steps toward equality? Are we prepared to take up the fight when we see our own – and perhaps above all others' – equality being threatened and violated? Are we striving to ensure that the structures, practices, and services of our society treat everyone equally? What does this require of us as individuals, professionals, and communities?



## Freedom

*"Article I – Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good.*

*Article II – The goal of any political association is the conservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, safety and resistance against oppression.*

(...)

*Article IV – Liberty consists of doing anything which does not harm others: thus, the exercise of the natural rights of each man has only those borders which assure other members of the society the fruition of these same rights. These borders can be determined only by the law."*

**- The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, 1789**

*"The value base of democracy, freedom, justice, and equality are big matters."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

Since the early days of democracy, equality has been associated with freedom. The citizens of the ancient Athens, a relatively small group of men, considered it a condition of their freedom that no one permanently ruled over another citizen. Equality was the guarantee and safeguard of freedom. Equal freedoms were also the main content of equality. To be equal with other citizens was to have the same freedoms as others.

The democratic form of government was born as a solution to the problem concerning how citizens who considered each other as equals could maintain their equal freedoms. The greatest threat to these freedoms came from those who were at the moment in power. Thus, the power of the rulers had to be limited: first by drawing lots for decision-makers on a case-by-case basis, and later by electing decision-makers to limited terms of office.

By this arrangement, the citizens temporarily took back the power so that they could again hand it over to the people they elected. When casting their votes, the citizens were at the same time equals (one citizen, one vote) and free (vote as you wish). Did this kind of democracy work perfectly? Hardly. Did it help to protect citizens' freedoms? Amazingly often and for a surprisingly long time.

The extension of equality to new groups of people – workers, women, minorities, children – has usually meant precisely granting them equal freedoms, or at least extending them. At the core of the development of freedom has been individual freedom: each person has the right to decide as far as possible on their own issues and to lead a life of their own choosing.

This type of freedom is closely connected to the opportunity to make one's life valuable and humane. To achieve these freedoms, workers went on strikes, women marched, residents of colonies revolted, and minorities rose in resistance. These are still the main battles of democracy, and the turn towards authoritarianism is often first noticed in the narrowing of the freedom of women and minorities.

Freedom is always a somewhat vague concept, and it is sometimes difficult to know whether certain groups and individuals are truly free, even if no one forcibly or otherwise restrains them. In democratic societies, freedoms are written into the law as rights. The first universal statement of these rights was the French Revolution's Declaration of Human and Civil Rights, which asserted that all people were born free and equal in rights. Although a more comprehensive list of rights than this declaration was approved by the UN after the Second World War, the vast majority of people in the world, and many individuals in even the most democratic countries, do not enjoy the full freedoms of their rights. The work is still in progress.

Most people have the most concrete experience of freedom and equality in their everyday lives. There are daily situations in families, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, and hobbies, which measure the individuals' rights to decide on their own life.

The encounters in public services are also concrete test situations of individual freedom. Am I being asked to express my own opinions and views? Are my needs and wishes taken seriously? If decisions are made against my wishes and wills, are they justified? Am I given new opportunities to make a difference in my life and to be a mean-

ingful member of the society? Will I be able to combine my knowledge and skills creatively with other people?

One of the major challenges of democracy, that apparently seems to cause a paradox, is the tension between freedom and equality. In the light of numerous historical precedents, but also of many everyday situations, it seems that maximizing the freedom of individuals often leads to the decline of equality. Powerful individuals use their own freedom to rise above others and pursue their own interests. Maximised equality, on the other hand, seems to lead to a reduction of all freedoms, as every difference in freedoms is seen as a sign of inequality.

Just this very impossibility of perfectly fitting together the two of the most important values of democracy means that democracy will never be complete. However, it does not mean that we cannot constantly become better at finding new ways of promoting equality and freedom side by side and working through the tensions that arise between them.

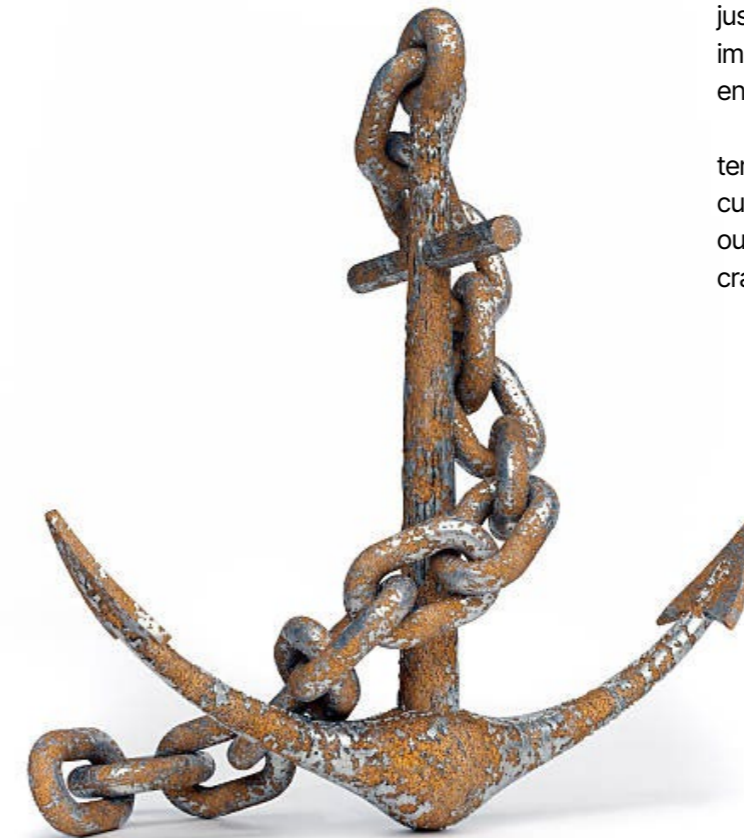
# Lifelines

## 3. Lifelines

Democracy is based on participation, trust, knowledge, and justice. Many people feel that these four lifelines of democracy are currently under threat. However, we can all strengthen the vitality of democracy through our daily actions.

Sustaining democracy in our lives requires a wide range of efforts. In the following, we describe the lifelines of democracy. In the Democracy Defence Dialogues, we identified certain vital forces that run through the society, maintaining and renewing democracy in all areas of life. The four lifelines we highlight – participation, trust, knowledge, and justice – are significant because they have an impact specifically in the situations where citizens encounter the state.

These lifelines also deserve our special attention because many people feel that they are currently under threat. We all must therefore play our parts in strengthening the threads of democratic lifelines.



*"Democracy cannot live without the influence of the people. We cannot discuss democracy in isolation from ourselves.*

*We create democracy, we are part of that democracy. It is precisely what we do for that democracy that makes it live."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**



## Participation

*“Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. It is this potential that we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potentiality for violence, unreason, and submission to authority. The goal of man and society should be human independence: a concern not with image of popularity but with finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic.”*

**- The Port Huron Statement, 1962**

*“Participation is an important force of change of democracy, everyone should have access to it. There is now a risk that democracy will be weakened by the fact that experiences of exclusion will be reinforced in people’s minds.”*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

**“Influence and belonging are the two main threads of the lifeline of participation. I want to have an impact in places where I feel I belong. I feel that I belong when I can have an influence.”**

Everyone usually wants to be able to influence matters concerning their own lives. Only in very exceptional circumstances – usually when our own capacity to act is significantly reduced – are we prepared to put the power over our own lives in the hands of others. However, the experience of participation is not limited to having an impact on our own lives. Participation involves the experience of belonging to a group of people, a community, or a wider societal entity.

Influence and belonging are the two main threads of the lifeline of participation. I want to have an impact in places where I feel I belong. I feel that I belong when I can have an influence. Participation means having a place in the world.

The experiences of participation are unevenly distributed even in the most democratic countries. Some citizens receive affirmation from their early childhood on that they are a valued persons in their own community. These experiences make it easier to express ones concerns also later in life, both in one’s immediate circle and in the society at large.

However, many people learn in childhood, at home or in the school, that nobody really cares about their views. This experience often continues in their working lives, or it might start there, and it reflects upon many other situations, shaping the person’s relationship with the surrounding society. For some, exclusion might become a permanent state, resulting in emotional loneliness, indifference, and cynicism. These in turn provide a breeding ground for populism and radicalization.

Particularly relevant are those situations where people are dealing with personally important issues, such as their own life choices, conflicts, and crises. Precisely moments like these provide individuals with the most tangible experiences of their place in the world and their significance to other people.

Many public services in our society are built to help and support people in precisely these kinds of situations. Yet, the action within these services frequently fails to strengthen people’s participation. This can be due to scarce resources, lack of skilled workers, rush, difficulties in professional interaction, poor management, as well as general lack of trust. As a result, the patient’s interaction with the health-care professional is reduced to one-way questioning and routine instructions, children and young people have no meaningful influence at school, and the client of the social welfare office is unable follow the guidelines they receive because they do not feel that the instructions take their daily challenges into account.

*“They do not hear what kind of help you want, but you are just offered to take these medicines. You get the feeling that there is not enough help. They should also ask what you want and remember that every person is an individual.”*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

In such circumstances and situations, it might seem like people get what they need – education, care, and support – but something essential is missing. When the activities and encounters fail to support participation and the person’s own agency, the learning, care, and support may be misdirected, or the person might be unwilling to receive it. This has a significant impact on whether the services will be able to achieve their intended goals. If a person is not an active participant, their learning remains superficial, their health stays on shaky grounds, and their grip on their own challenges remains vague.

*“As a youth worker, I believe that young people’s participation should be progressed in every possible way and to be quite sensitive, to listen and to take things forward. We need to change and develop the whole entity. It is not just the methods, but the way of thinking and acting that needs to change. We need to change our culture.”*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

Many of our daily encounters involve the possibility to enhance other people’s experiences of participation, and thereby to create new opportunities to carry out the democratic way of life together. The central lifeline of democracy, participation, can be cherished in all encounters by placing oneself on the other person’s side as a partner and making a real effort to listen, to take their perspective seriously, and to support their agency, in other words their ability to influence their own life. It is often through other people that we find our own direction in life and our voice in the society.

Furthermore, participation can be strengthened not only in the encounters between professionals and ordinary citizens, but also in the interaction between professionals and in the practices of work communities. Working together, organizing one’s work in a meaningful way, and experiencing participation strengthens democracy in work communities and is reflected as affirmative professional agency into client encounters, as well.

## Trust

*"Trust embedded in personal relations that are strong, frequent, and nested in wider networks is sometimes called 'thick trust'. On the other hand, a thinner trust in 'the generalized other' like your new acquaintance from the coffee shop, also rests implicitly on some background of shared social networks and expectations of reciprocity. Thin trust is even more useful than thick trust, because it extends the radius of trust beyond the roster of people whom we can know personally."*

**- Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 2000**

*"The entire democratic system is based on building trust."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

**"Trust is invisible. We only pay attention to it when it disappears. Lack of trust, on the other hand, is visible. It manifests itself in the prohibition signs on the walls, locked doors, gates and fences, suspicious looks, and visibly armed guards in the public places."**

Trust is invisible. We only pay attention to it when it disappears. Lack of trust, on the other hand, is visible. It manifests itself in the prohibition signs on the walls, locked doors, gates and fences, suspicious looks, and visibly armed guards in the public places.

Democratic societies operate on a widespread but invisible web of trust. This network of trust is built and strengthened every day in all areas of society. Each time a person perceives others acting in consideration of their needs, one more thread is created in the interwoven web of trust. Stopping the car at a crosswalk, giving space in the crowded public transport, opening the door for another person, and kind words at the checkout are all acts of trust.

Equally, trust can be undermined by daily encounters. When a person finds that their fellow humans do not care about their existence, do not listen to their views, and do not provide help even when asked for it, trust begins to erode. The loss of trust in others can also easily lead to a lack of interest in earning their trust in oneself. This sets off a negative cycle of mistrust which, in the worst case, can destroy the network of societal trust.

In a democracy, trust is needed between the citizens, but also between the citizens and the administration. Ultimately, public authorities and political decision-makers always act on the basis of the trust that citizens place in them. Respectively, it is impossible for the administration to handle its tasks properly if it cannot rely on the citizens acting together in agreed ways. We trust that people will behave properly in public spaces, that library books will be returned, that parents will tend their children to school in the morning, and that police instructions will be followed during a demonstration.

*"We are organized in a very hierarchical way and we have strong power structures and that power is largely based on expertise and decision-making. It should be adjusted that power in official structures is on an equal footing with the citizens. So that there would be a balance and a genuinely common ground. This is achieved through openness, that is where the trust comes from."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

Democratic trust is most visibly measured in elections, but on a day-to-day level, it is built and renewed in encounters between representatives of public power and ordinary citizens. Parents leave their children in the care of professionals in nurseries and schools. In the event of illness or crisis, we turn to social and health-care professionals. At all times, people also trust that the tax authority will act correctly, that the collected taxes will be used responsibly, that justice will prevail, and that the authorities will be there when needed.

Public services can therefore be thought of as nodes in the trust network of a democratic society. They create and maintain trust between citizens and administrations, but they can also build trust between individual citizens as well as different groups. In libraries, swimming pools, and youth centres people get a sense of whom they share their local environment with. Playgrounds and family programmes in child health-care centres bring families in similar life situation closer together.

In schools, pupils from different backgrounds learn to work together. A similar experience can be created for the parents if they are encouraged to work alongside the school as a supportive educational community. Without the context of such trusted public places and institutions, it is difficult for the citizens to build trusting relationships with each other, especially with strangers.

**"Public services can therefore be thought of as nodes in the trust network of a democratic society"**

The widespread and everyday "thin trust" that is vital to society can be described as general reciprocity. When general reciprocity prevails, citizens are prepared to help each other without knowing each other personally and without expecting immediate benefit from their help. A neighbour's car is pulled out of the snow together. In playgrounds, we also look a little bit after others' children. A wallet forgotten in the library eventually finds its owner. A lost stranger is helped to find their way home. In the atmosphere of general reciprocity, societies operate more flexibly, efficiently, and creatively than in a climate of mistrust.

Unfortunately, public service professionals can also, often quite unconsciously, undermine public trust and untie the knots in the invisible web of trust. In particular, the most vulnerable citizens, minorities, and special groups report that they have difficulties in accessing services belonging to them, receive seemingly arbitrary and badly reasoned decisions on permits and aids, and experience lack of transparency. This will erode trust in the society and its fairness.

## Knowledge

*"The temptation to believe what feels right assails us at all times from all directions. Authoritarianism begins when we can no longer tell the difference between the true and the appealing."*

**- Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 2018**

*"The better we use knowledge, the better we are able to discuss, the better we are able to make decisions, the better the parts of civil society work."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

When people want to work together, they need a shared understanding of reality. In authoritarian communities, people act in accordance with the beliefs about the world held by the group in power. Sometimes these beliefs may be based on knowledge, but this knowledge is distorted by the influence of the ambitions of those in power and the absence of criticism brings it to a standstill.

When knowledge is not constantly created, cherished, and corrected together, those in power must either force or manipulate people into acting in compliance with their own beliefs. Often distorted beliefs and the lack of research-based knowledge result in bad decisions and disastrous consequences for the entire community.

In a democracy, we try act otherwise. In the ideal situation, the first step is to use knowledge to find out the true nature of things, whether it is a dispute between pupils in a classroom or the means to balance state finances. After this, the relevance of the knowledge for collective action is discussed.

The purpose of the discussion is to clarify the knowledge from many different angles, correct any possible distortions, and point out areas that have so far remained inaccessible. Based on this,

the aim is to make the best decisions, guided by knowledge. We trust that the jointly understood knowledge will sufficiently guide all individuals into the same direction, without the need for coercion or manipulation. Thus, we can ensure that the knowledge that guides people's collective lives can be corrected and refined to better reflect the ever-changing reality.

However, democracy does not always guarantee that people will try to base their coexistence on valid knowledge. Democracy also includes the freedom to act contrary to the recommendations given, for example, by experts and researchers. This is what happens when knowledge is used for political purposes, and only those sources of knowledge favouring one's own values and views are extracted from the broader base of available information. The role of knowledge in the society must therefore be constantly clarified because – like participation and trust – the lifeline of knowledge runs through all the different areas of life in democratic societies. Reliable knowledge is needed in the education of children, production of food, manufacturing of goods, building of cities, treatment of illnesses, and management of the state.

Furthermore, if the citizens do not get a concrete experience of the role of knowledge in managing their daily lives, it is also difficult for them to understand the role of knowledge in societal decision-making. In this context too, public services form a thread that binds the everyday lives of citizens together with the state institutions.

When people feel that the schools, bureaus, health-care centres, and the local government are guided by the best available knowledge, it is easier for them to trust in the relevance of knowledge for wider societal decision-making. On the other hand, trust in decision-making, even in the big picture, is eroded if decisions affecting one's life are based on incomplete or incorrect knowledge.

Keeping knowledge at the core of a democratic society also gives citizens the tools to criticize the grievances they perceive, question the decisions of those in power, and expose misconducts. This applies to the power of the teachers in schools, actions of the doctors in hospitals as well as the reforms pushed by politicians. In a well-functioning democracy, such criticism is seen as relevant, even if it is not always easy to receive. Instead of confrontation, it is seen as an opening for discussion.

At the moment, there are many threats to the exploitation of knowledge in democratic societies. Some of these threats stem from the changes in the way people search for and process information, brought about by the internet and social media. It is easy for citizens to search for knowledge online, but it is not as easy to distinguish information from mis- or disinformation. As a result, the attempts of many commercial and political actors to manipulate people through misinformation or ignorance are undermining trust and creating divisions between people.

Another threat to the exploitation of knowledge arises from the fact that many of the activities of our society have become increasingly technical and distant from the lives of the citizens. This has weakened our ability to process people's "experiential" knowledge and combine it with expert knowledge in a meaningful way.

The main threats to knowledge can be summarized in three beliefs: "I know best", "Only the word of authority is knowledge", and "Truth does not exist". These beliefs often feed off each other. Many people end up uncritically relying on their own beliefs, or on the teachings of an authority (individual, group, or institution) important to them, rather than on reliable sources of knowledge. Some may find it best to abandon the pursuit of truth altogether. If such attitudes towards the role of knowledge in human life and society become widespread, democracy that is based on knowledge-based decision-making will be in grave danger.

Professionals working in public services are increasingly confronted with such threats to knowledge in their work, for example, when the views of experts are disputed, research data is dismissed, and official recommendations are questioned. At the same time, many services are struggling to make meaningful use of people's own expertise or empirical knowledge, in other words, their personal understanding of their own life situation and the issues affecting it.

There is no reason to be immobilized in the face of these threats. At their best, public services can serve as guides to the use of knowledge in people's coexistence in various contexts. Knowledge is rarely adopted unilaterally. Learning new things and questioning old assumptions requires encountering, being heard, and building trust.

This often requires service professionals to take people's own experiential knowledge seriously and thus listening to how the individual perceives their life situation. When you start to feel heard about your own experiences, it is easier to receive the professional's insights and guidance. In the best case, the knowledge required in the situation is formed through a dialogue between experiential and expert knowledge.

*"As an organization or as a government official, how do you want to reach people who do not trust the knowledge provided by researchers or the government? How do you create a dialogical discussion with them? A big question, because I believe that when people genuinely discuss and meet, it breaks down boundaries and buffs out the hardest edges and creates trust and mutual receptivity towards views and knowledge."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

## Justice

*"Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought."*

- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 1971

Justice is one of the most important goals of the democratic communities. It is intrinsically linked to equality, i.e., the desire to treat every person equally, regardless of gender, age, background, wealth, or social status. In a democracy, justice is also linked to freedom. The attempt is to create equal treatment by maximizing the freedoms of all, not by forcing everyone into the same mould. However, such an ideal of justice combining equality and freedom is a demanding goal. The pursuit of this goal is the noblest endeavour of both the democratic state and the democratic way of life.

*"For me, the really important thing about democracy is the human rights aspect. You could say that everyone can be themselves and be heard, even if they belong to a minority, in whatever way they belong to a minority. However, so that you can safely be yourself and live your own kind of life."*

- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues

Justice can be thought of not only as an end, but also as a means to help individuals and communities to flourish. The historical development of democracy shows that increased fairness – for example, for women, workers, children, and minorities – expands opportunities to utilize the capabilities of different individuals for the benefit of the entire society. In this context, too, authoritarian societies demonstrate the opposite of these ideals by showing what happens to the welfare, economy, sciences, and arts, for example, when

the rights of certain groups of people are oppressed or some individuals are exploited for the benefit of others.

For a long time, it seemed like the democratic societies were becoming increasingly just. Of course, this development is still taking place in many areas of the society. At the same time, people's experiences of injustice and inequality are growing. In particular, the experience of economic inequality causes a feeling of exclusion. It does not fit into the majority's sense of justice that the wealth of the richest people is increasing to the maximum while others are struggling to make a sufficient living. The discrepancy is particularly striking on a global level, but it also affects wealthy democracies from within.

Experiences of injustice are not limited to wealth. In many people's lives, they are primarily related to the opportunities to pursue a good life. This includes the opportunity to have adequate conditions for living, be educated, do meaningful work, spend invigorating leisure time, enjoy culture and nature, raise a family, stay healthy as well as receive help and support in difficult situations.

It is precisely to enhance these issues that the democratic welfare states have developed their many public services, from child health-care centres, nurseries and schools to libraries, hospitals, and social welfare offices. Therefore, many of the most fundamental everyday experiences of the societal justice or injustice stem from the encounters with public services. Justice is also intimately intertwined with the other lifelines of democracy: it strengthens participation, builds trust, and is based on reliable knowledge.

The experiences of just treatment are typically condensed into two issues: Am I getting the things I am entitled to? Am I being treated equally with others?

In this respect, encounters in the public services can strengthen the experience of a just society when people are clearly told what they are entitled to and how the services ensure that this right is fulfilled. Equally, the experience of justice is strengthened when people realize that everyone else is treated in the same way. Conversely,

experiences of injustice arise in situations where the rights are not fulfilled or are arbitrarily different for different individuals.

Questions of justice are present everywhere in the democratic societies. Kindergartens and school classrooms' everyday life is full of situations where teachers have to practice justice among children and young people. Similarly, justice is tested when we go to the health-care centre to seek treatment, ask the tax office for advice on tax matters, or must report a crime to the police.

The most extreme cases concerning justice are often resolved in the courts. Political decisions should also be considered from the perspective of justice. These and numerous other situations measure the presence or absence of justice in our lives.

From the perspective of justice, the most significant situations are those in which people experience injustice. Many citizens have experienced injustice in the very services and functions of society that should have the progress and preservation of justice as one of their main functions. The experience of a just society is injured if a person feels that they have not been heard in their case, or if, for example, they or their loved ones are denied an important form of support, permission, or medicine on inadequate grounds.

These situations are the touchstones of democratic encounters. They require both sensitivity and courage from the public service professionals. Sensitivity is needed to hear the injustice experienced by people and the consequences of this injustice. This is particularly demanding when it comes to abuses committed by someone of one's own professional group, and most difficult when it comes to harm caused by one's own actions. It also requires the courage to act, to find out the real nature of the problem and, if the truth so requires, to fight alongside the citizens to right the wrongs.

*"We should apologize more often when we fail. Why can we not openly talk about our screw-ups and what we are doing? Internally, failure is not desirable. Could we open up our culture and talk about our failures?"*

- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues

At its best, righting the wrongs people have experienced and restoring justice will strengthen the faith of all parties in the functioning of a democratic society. Often the mere fact that someone stands up to defend the injured party is meaningful. We cannot avoid making mistakes, and injustice can hardly ever be completely eradicated from our society. However, we can choose not to close our eyes to injustice but rather strive toward the justice in all situations and encounters.

## 4. Steps Towards Democratic Encounters

In a democratic way of life, we encounter each other together, listening, learning, challenging, deliberating, and imagining. Democratic encounters strengthen the role of public service professionals as actors of democracy and increase the agency of both the professionals and citizens who use services.



# Steps



**“All in all, democratic encounters can be anything from small, fleeting moments to profound pauses to reflect on life’s big questions”**

Above we have described the two cornerstones of democracy, freedom, and equality, as well as characterized the four lifelines we identified from the Democracy Defence Dialogues: participation, trust, knowledge, and justice. Next, we ask how we can practically increase the democratic nature of everyday encounters in our interactions with each other and in the public services where people’s experience of society is shaped.

In response to this question, we present six steps to democratic encounters. The steps are based on the experiences of the participants in the Democracy Defence Dialogues in different service situations and their suggestions for strengthening participation in the society. At the same time, they build on the solid cornerstones of democracy – equality and freedom – and contribute to strengthening the lifelines of participation, trust, knowledge, and justice. By applying these practical steps, we can strengthen democracy in various encounters.

The steps we describe – together, listening, learning, challenging, deliberating, and imagining – are not new actions or procedures that add extra work for already overburdened professionals. Instead, they portray a way or style of doing something. As such, they are relatively minor changes to one’s own professional practices which still can have major effects. All in all, democratic encounters can be anything from small, fleeting moments to profound pauses to reflect on life’s big questions. They all have their own impact on the vitality of our democratic society.

Additionally, the six steps we describe can be seen as different stages of democratic encounters. Not all of them will necessarily take place in every single situation or encounter. The order of the steps may also vary. They are like more dance moves, inviting us to create together the choreography and roles that are appropriate to each situation. As such, they are invitations to a dialogue between equal partners.

Ultimately, public services of a democratic society are about one citizen helping another. We should remember that the parts can also change. In another moment, a person working in public services may be a citizen facing challenges in their own life and needing the support of professionals from different fields.

By strengthening the role of public service professionals as actors of democracy and providers of societal experience, we can increase the agency of both the professionals and citizens who use services. The thought of mutual democratic citizenship clarifies the ethos and relevance of public sector work. As participation and trust are strengthened both in client encounters and within working communities, the effectiveness of work is also enhanced.

In a digitalising world and services, democratic encounters can take new forms, but in online context, too, we can encounter each other together, listening, learning, challenging, deliberating, and imagining.

**Together**

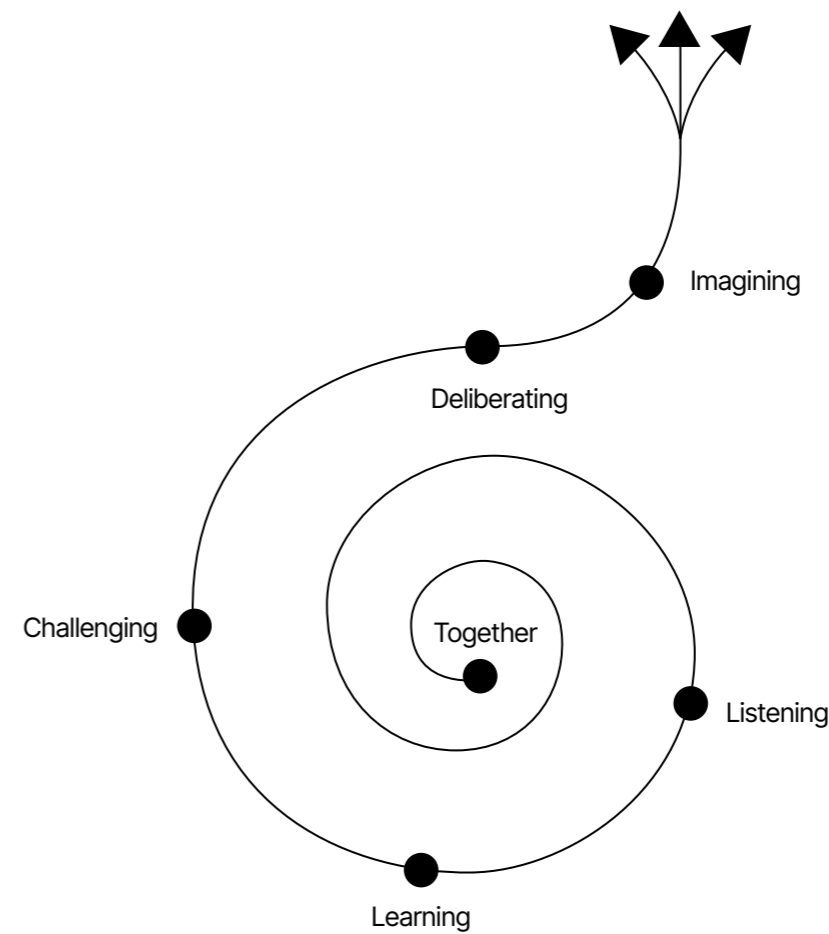
*“By encouraging everyone to take part in that collective discussion, we can make better decisions than any one of us alone.”*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

In democratic encounters, situations or problems that arise in people’s lives are solved together. It could be a pupil’s problem with schoolwork, a situation at the health-care centre, a difficulty

filling in a tax return form or a life crisis that requires support from the social welfare office. The first steps to working together are often taken by opening up the situation, for example by asking: “Tell me what is on your mind and let us see what we can do about it together?”

Doing things together signifies an equal encounter, without distorting people’s different roles. A professional is still a professional, whose role is to use the knowledge, skills, and resources that their education, experience, and position provide for helping and supporting the citizen coming to them. The citizen who comes in contact with services is present in the situation through their own experience, life situation, and skills. A democratic



**Figure 2.** Steps towards democratic encounters

encounter shows respect to their freedom to express themselves as they wish, to choose the most appropriate means of resolving their situation and to proceed at their own pace.

*"The value of experiential expertise, of young people and their families as experiential experts, should be raised. The starting point should be that experimental expertise is respected and that residents and officials are partners."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

The ethos of working together does not need to be limited to the interactions and direct encounters between the people present in each moment. Together we can also think about other people who are involved, how they are affected, and who else should be invited to join in the conversation. Many encounters in nurseries, schools, health-care centres, and social welfare offices can also be opportunities to strengthen citizens' relationships with each other. At its best, a person in a challenging situation will have access to flexible support, combining different resources, both from professionals and from their own private network. This supports long-term problem-solving in the individual's own daily activities and in the wider context of their life.

## Listening

*"Hearing everyone's voice makes decisions more deliberate and increases trust in the society."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

The experience of being heard is an essential thread in all the lifelines of democracy. Being heard strengthens participation because it creates the experience of being taken seriously. It also builds trust between the professional and the citizen using the service. Listening helps to base our common activities on knowledge. It also reflects the aspiration to treat each person equally and justly.

In democratic encounters we seek to listen and understand how a person sees and experiences their situation. Listening is therefore a key part of the professional skills of many professionals. By listening we aim at understanding how this particular person sees the world and their place in it. At the same time, it gives space for the professional to listen to themselves. They can take time to reflect on the meaning of what the person is telling them and how their own knowledge and skills can help them in the situation. In addition to the actual service situation, one can stop for listening to the other person at the entrance of a day-care centre, in a hospital corridor, or when a police patrol visits a shopping centre.

Listening carefully is particularly important when we encounter someone with whom we do not share a common language, who for some reason has difficulties communicating, or simply has a different way of expressing themselves from the majority of the population. This may be the case, for example, with many immigrants or people with disabilities. In these situations, it is particularly important to ensure that listening also leads to an understanding of the specific life situation of the person in question. Key sentences or questions on

this path often include: "How could I understand you better?", "Tell me more, so that I can be sure I understand," and "Let me check if I have understood correctly."

*"There are an infinite variety of linguistic challenges, for example questionnaires from the government, which are in the official language – difficult to answer if you don't have the language skills."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

## Learning

Democratic encounters are shared learning situations for both the citizens using the services and the professionals providing them. Naturally, in many situations we make use of established practices and professional routines, but every situation also provides an opportunity to learn something new about life, other people, and oneself. At its best, learning can become a general atmosphere that sets the tone for public services, drawing from the pool of knowledge and skills that stems from the encounters of equal people who trust each other.

Cherishing learning means accepting that we may not figure out all the essentials right away. This leads us to consider what we should understand better or in a wider perspective in order to act meaningfully or to solve the problem at hand. The way forward is to ask questions appropriate to the situation.

Furthermore, it is often good to make space for things that may not have been said yet: "Is there anything else you have in mind?" Similarly, it may be necessary to include other people and parties in the reflection: "Who else should we consult to get a better understanding of this?" Learning can also mean acquiring new knowledge: "What should we understand more?"

Professionals working in the services are also constantly learning about their own activities and their impact on the citizens who use their services. Therefore, a joint discussion can sometimes focus on the encounter at hand, pausing to reflect on how the encounter has gone so far: "What is it like to talk about these things in this situation?", "Have you had the experience of being heard and understood?", and "Have you received the help you need?"

*"It is really important to pay attention, but then you can think about how you can help create different ways of democracy, so that people with different personalities, different backgrounds, different skills can find their own way of doing things."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

## Challenging

Democratic encounters, when necessary, are also critical and reflective. Democratic societies do not want to advocate uncritical faith in authority, nor are they satisfied with doing things the same way they have always been done. Thus, critical perspectives on the issues addressed and prevailing practices are welcomed within the services. These perspectives are considered as a means of learning together and improving working practices.

*"Participation and dialogue are important in general, as is the involvement of customers in the development of operations."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

Challenging can be encouraged on both sides. Professionals can use their expertise to challenge the citizens who have come to the services to take a broader view from different perspectives: "Have you thought that you could see the situation in this way, too?" Equally, the service users can be encouraged to be critical of the professionals, their views, and their actions: "Tell me as directly as possible if you feel that the views I have expressed or the actions I have taken seem surprising or wrong."

Especially in difficult and complex situations, it is good to proceed with a subtle yet honest reflection: "Has all the essentials been brought up? Have we considered the different points of view? What do we not understand yet?"

## Deliberating

Citizens often turn to public services when they feel they need the skills and resources of a professional in their lives. In many situations, there are many alternative ways forward and there are various means to achieve the desired goals. However, few people want to outsource their own life solutions to other people. This requires joint deliberation.

*"You can get help from the service I go to (...) It requires that you have to go there yourself, and you get help and support and figure out together what you could do."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

The professional is in many ways able to help the citizen to assess and deliberate upon the options that affect their life: "In my experience and expertise, this choice often results in these things. Which of these options would best correspond to your needs and values? Which effects do you think this would have on your life? How do you think it would affect your close ones?"

Deliberating together is not just about going through the options for a particular situation and calculating their effects. It is also a way of empowering people to take agency, that is, the ability to take responsibility of their own lives. It is a crucial element of the vitality of democracy, because in democratic societies we rely on the ability of citizens to make decisions on their own. However, this is not an innate quality, but one that needs to be exercised and supported throughout our lives. Democratic encounters in services strengthen this ability.



## Imagining

*"Let us imagine a perfect wellbeing services county where youth participation and democracy would work perfectly. Everyone can close their eyes and imagine what it would look like. Let us imagine that everything has gone perfectly and that in 2030 the wellbeing services county is functioning ideally. What would the county be like? What does it look like? What services would it have? How could young people influence services and the area as a whole?"*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

We aim present being fully here and now in the democratic encounters, but their impact also radiates beyond the immediate situation. Encounters take on a deeper meaning when we keep in mind their small and large effects on people's lives over different time scales. Perceiving these effects requires imagination.

**"A meaningful encounter in services radiates its impact into the home, workplace, free time activities, and even casual moments with otherwise unknown people of the person who received support and help"**

A child health-care nurse, school assistant, social worker, police officer, or employment adviser can sometimes see the impact that even a single encounter with a single person can have on the lives of many other people. A meaningful encounter in services radiates its impact into the home, workplace, free time activities, and even casual moments with otherwise unknown people of the person who received support and help. At the same time, the lifelines of democracy are passed on from one place to another, from one situation to the next. Thus, new democratic encounters are created.

With every encounter, we are also building the future of our society. So, we can ask ourselves, "What kind of world do I want to be a part of by my words and actions?" and "What contribution can I make in this encounter to our collective future?" Achieving the core democratic values of equality and freedom in the future can only be possible for us and our descendants if we make choices for them now.



## 5. Democracy's Horizons

Practicing democratic encounters will also prepare us for future social and ecological challenges. We must anticipate how to safeguard our democratic values during crises and beyond. We must also ask whether democracy can ultimately be limited to human beings or whether it should extend to all living creatures.

*"Essentially, all development comes from conflict, but democracy is the system that allows this wildly complex structure of modern society to create some forces that allow conflict to become constructive, rather than destructive starting points."*

**- Participant of Democracy Defence Dialogues**

Finally, it is also worth taking a moment to look ahead at the challenges that democracy has ahead, many of which are already at our doorstep. Some of these challenges will require whole new skill sets, wisdom, and effort from us, which in turn demonstrate the importance of capacity for democratic encounters. Ultimately, these new resources must come from ordinary citizens and cannot only be outsourced to experts. We want to believe that practicing democratic encounters will prepare us to meet the future challenges and difficulties of democracy and to seize the opportunities hidden in them.

# Horizons

Developments in the recent decades have shown that the world as a whole is not becoming more democratic, as was imagined some time ago. Authoritarian regimes have tightened their grip, and many previously strong democratic societies are facing threatening developments that fuel polarization, pessimism, and populism. If the forces of authoritarianism and hierarchy take global developments under their sway, the prospects for all democracies become endangered.

For this reason, we need dialogue between professionals in different environments. Many public service professionals interact with colleagues from other countries. We believe that these situations can also be democratic encounters which foster sharing experiences and creating understanding of the democratic dimensions of their professional roles and tasks. Equally, in the spirit of true democracy, we are constantly learning from others. Sometimes the experiences that best illuminate democracy come precisely from those people who cannot take democracy, freedom, or equality for granted in their own environments.

**"At the same time, we need to anticipate how to safeguard democratic practices during and beyond the crises of the future."**

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic awakened us to realize in how unpredictable ways global crises can unravel our societies. Sudden crises also challenge democratic institutions and practices. During the pandemic, Finland also resorted to the emergency powers legislation, which allowed for temporary restrictions on citizens' fundamental rights. In this respect, it was also a crisis for democracy.

As the world becomes more unstable, we cannot be lulled into assuming that similar or even worse crises will not happen in the future. We must therefore be vigilant and prepare for the fact that future crises may pose unpredictable threats to our democratic values. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all public services should assess how crises and states of emergency affect the democratic nature of services. At the same time, we need to anticipate how to safeguard democratic practices during and beyond the crises of the future.

Perhaps the most significant crises we are currently facing are the ecological crises, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution. They are forcing us to rethink our position on the planet, which we share with other living creatures. Thus, we need to reflect on what democracy means in humanity's relation to the rest of living nature. These questions are also becoming increasingly pressing in public services, from nurseries to the government.

We are beginning to understand ever so clearly that almost everything we do affects the natural world around us and that natural environments affect us. We must therefore ask, can democracy in the future only apply to people? Or should we extend our concept of democracy to other living beings on whom our life's necessities in many ways depend? What would the cornerstones of democracy – freedom and equality – then mean? In the future, democratic encounters may indeed point us towards entirely new ways of living together in our shared world in an ecologically sustainable and diverse way.

## About the Writers

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# **NATIONAL DIALOGUES**

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