



Ministry of the Interior
Finland

Migration | Publications of the Ministry of the Interior 2023:12

Immigration Dialogues

Diverse discussions on the daily life and politics of
immigration

Publications of the Ministry of the Interior 2023:12

Immigration Dialogues

Diverse discussions on the daily life
and politics of immigration

Elina Henttonen and Kai Alhanen

Ministry of the Interior Helsinki 2023

Publication distribution

**Institutional Repository
for the Government
of Finland Valto**

julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi

Publication sale

**Online bookstore
of the Finnish
Government**

vnjulkaisumyynti.fi



Ministry of the Interior
Finland



Ministry of Economic Affairs
and Employment of Finland



MINISTRY OF FINANCE
FINLAND



OPETUS- JA KULTTUURIMINISTERIÖ
UNDERSVINGS- OCH KULTURMINISTERIET
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND CULTURE



MINISTRY OF JUSTICE
FINLAND



MINISTRY OF
SOCIAL AFFAIRS AND HEALTH

Ministry of the Interior
CC BY-SA 4.0

ISBN pdf: 978-952-324-963-9
ISSN pdf: 2490-077X

Layout: PunaMusta Oy

Helsinki 2023

Immigration Dialogues

Diverse discussions on the daily life and politics of immigration

Publications of the Ministry of the Interior 2023:12		Subject	Migration
Publisher	Ministry of the Interior		
Author(s)	Elina Henttonen and Kai Alhanen		
Group author	Valtaamo Oy and Aretai Oy/Dialogue Academy		
Language	English	Pages	59

Abstract

Arranged in autumn 2022, the Immigration Dialogues included discussions on immigration from the different perspectives of nearly 700 individuals. The starting point for the series of discussions coordinated by the Ministry of the Interior was to increase dialogue and understanding of immigration between individuals and groups of people. Another goal was to broaden the overall picture of immigration based on the experiences of individuals in different life situations who have moved to Finland and individuals who were born in Finland. The dialogues also sought a better understanding of what promotes the integration and inclusion of immigrants into Finnish society.

This compilation describes the Immigration Dialogues as a whole, the key topics and perspectives, and, first and foremost, the diverse immigration experiences of immigrants and individuals who were born in Finland. Challenges related to the Finnish language, the need to be included in and belong to meaningful communities, finding worthwhile employment and raising the next generation became the central topics of the dialogues. The discussions made visible how immigrants living in different life situations have different questions and needs, which means that flexibility in solutions for integration and inclusion is required.

Through dialogue that generates trust and inclusion, it is possible to create a better understanding of the experiences related to immigration. Understanding such experiences will help us build better legislation, integration services, communities and everyday life in Finland.

The Immigration Dialogues were prepared through cross-administrative cooperation. In addition to the Ministry of the Interior, the implementation involved the Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Employment and the Economy, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Finnish National Agency for Education and the Finnish Immigration Service.

Keywords immigrant, immigration, experience, integration, employment, education, language, culture, cultural diversity, legislation, constructive discussion, Timeout, trust, inclusion, dialogue, immigrants, immigrant work, immigration policy, migration

ISBN PDF	978-952-324-963-9	ISSN PDF	2490-077X
-----------------	-------------------	-----------------	-----------

URN address <https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-963-9>

Maahanmuuttodialogit

Moniäänistä keskustelua maahanmuuton arjesta ja politiikasta

Sisäministeriön julkaisuja 2023:12		Teema	Maahanmuutto
Julkaisija	Sisäministeriö		
Tekijä/t	Elina Henttonen ja Kai Alhanen		
Yhteisötekijä	Valtaamo Oy ja Aretai Oy/DialogiAkatemia		
Kieli	englanti	Sivumäärä	59

Tiivistelmä

Syksyllä 2022 järjestetyissä Maahanmuuttodialogeissa keskusteltiin maahanmuutosta lähes 700 ihmisen erilaisista näkökulmista käsin. Sisäministeriön koordinoiman keskustelutarjan lähtökohdaksi oli lisätä eri ihmisten ja ihmisryhmien välillä keskustelua ja ymmärrystä maahanmuutosta. Samalla pyrittiin avartamaan maahanmuuton kokonaiskuvaa erilaisten ja eri elämäntilanteissa elävien Suomeen muuttaneiden ja Suomessa syntyneiden ihmisten kokemusten pohjalta. Dialogeissa tavoiteltiin myös parempaa ymmärrystä siitä, mikä edistää maahan muuttavien kotoutumista ja osallisuutta suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa.

Tämä kooste kuvaa Maahanmuuttodialogien keskustelujen kokonaisuutta, keskeisiä aiheita ja näkökulmia, sekä ennen kaikkea sekä maahan muuttaneiden että Suomessa syntyneiden keskustelijoiden moninaisia kokemuksia maahanmuutosta. Suomen kieleen liittyvät haasteet, tarve päästä mukaan ja kuulua itselle merkityksellisiin yhteisöihin, mielekäs työllistyminen ja seuraavan sukupolven kasvattaminen nousivat dialogien keskeisiksi aiheiksi. Keskustelut tekivät näkyväksi, kuinka erilaisissa tilanteissa elävillä maahan muuttaneilla on erilaisia kysymyksiä ja tarpeita, ja siksi myös kotoutumiseen ja osallisuuteen liittyviin ratkaisuihin kaivataan joustavuutta.

Luottamusta ja osallisuutta synnyttävällä dialogilla voimme luoda parempaa ymmärrystä maahanmuuttoon liittyvistä kokemuksista. Näiden kokemusten ymmärtäminen auttaa meitä yhdessä rakentamaan parempaa lainsäädäntöä, kotoutuspalveluita, yhteisöjä ja arkea Suomessa.

Maahanmuuttodialogit valmisteltiin poikkivaltiossa yhteistyössä. Sisäministeriön lisäksi mukana toteuttamisessa olivat opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, oikeusministeriö, sosiaali- ja terveysministeriö, työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö, ulkoministeriö, valtiovarainministeriö, Opetushallitus ja Maahanmuuttovirasto.

Asiasanat

maahanmuuttaja, maahanmuutto, dialogi, kokemus, kotoutuminen, työllistyminen, kasvatus, kieli, kulttuuri, monikulttuurisuus, lainsäädäntö, rakentava keskustelu, Erätauko, luottamus, osallisuus, maahanmuuttajat, maahanmuuttajatyö, maahanmuuttopolitiikka

ISBN PDF

978-952-324-963-9

ISSN PDF

2490-077X

Julkaisun osoite

<https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-963-9>

Migrationsdialogerna

Röster om migration i vardagen och politiken

Inrikesministeriets publikationer 2023:12		Tema	Migration
Utgivare	Inrikesministeriet		
Författare	Elina Henttonen och Kai Alhanen		
Utarbetad av	Valtaamo Oy och Aretai Oy/DialogiAkademia		
Språk	engelska	Sidantal	59

Referat

I migrationsdialogerna, som ordnades hösten 2022, bidrog nästan 700 människor till diskussionen om migration med olika synpunkter. Utgångspunkten för diskussionsserien, som samordnades av inrikesministeriet, var att öka dialogen om migrationen mellan olika människor och befolkningsgrupper samt deras förståelse för migrationen. Samtidigt var målet att ge en bredare helhetsbild av migrationen utifrån erfarenheter från olika slags människor som flyttat till eller fötts i Finland och som har olika livssituationer. I dialogerna strävade man också efter en bättre förståelse för hur de som flyttar till landet bättre kan integreras och engageras i det finländska samhället.

Detta sammandrag beskriver helheten av de diskussioner som fördes under migrationsdialogerna, centrala teman och perspektiv samt i synnerhet de varierande erfarenheterna som diskussionsdeltagarna, såväl invandrade personer som infödda finländare, har av migration. Viktiga frågor som behandlades i dialogerna var utmaningarna med det finska språket, behovet av att komma med i och tillhöra grupper som är betydelsefulla för en själv, en meningsfull sysselsättning och att uppfostra nästa generation. Dialogerna synliggjorde att invandrade i olika livssituationer har olika frågor och behov, och därför behöver också de lösningar som gäller integration och delaktighet vara flexibla.

Genom en dialog som skapar förtroende och delaktighet kan vi skapa bättre förståelse för erfarenheterna av migrationen. Att förstå dessa erfarenheter hjälper oss att tillsammans bygga upp bättre lagstiftning, integrationstjänster, gemenskaper och vardag i Finland.

Migrationsdialogerna bereddes genom förvaltningsövergripande samarbete. Utöver inrikesministeriet deltog också undervisnings- och kulturministeriet, justitieministeriet, social- och hälsovårdsministeriet, arbets- och näringsministeriet, utrikesministeriet, finansministeriet, Utbildningsstyrelsen och Migrationsverket i genomförandet.

Nyckelord

invandrad, invandrare, invandring, migration, erfarenhet, integration, sysselsättning, uppfostran, språk, kultur, mångkulturalism, lagstiftning, konstruktiv dialog, Dialogpaus, förtroende, delaktighet, dialog, invandrararbete, invandringspolitik

ISBN PDF	978-952-324-963-9	ISSN PDF	2490-077X
-----------------	-------------------	-----------------	-----------

URN-adress	https://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-952-324-963-9
-------------------	---

Contents

Preface	8
1 Introduction	10
2 Information about the discussions	13
3 Arrival in Finland	17
3.1 The good life in Finland	17
3.2 Difficult Finland	20
3.3 Two castes of immigrants	22
3.4 Experiences of racism	23
3.5 Life as a undocumented immigrant	25
3.6 Complex legislation and problems with cooperation between authorities	26
4 Leverage for integration	29
4.1 Integration requires the involvement of society	29
4.2 Difficult and important Finnish language	31
4.3 Belonging and inclusion in communities	33
4.4 Importance of religion	35
4.5 Integration in two directions?	36
5 Employment and related challenges	38
5.1 Immigrants as a solution to the labour shortage	38
5.2 Obstacles to employment	39
5.3 Prejudice and discrimination in working life	41
5.4 Qualification requirements and recognition of competence	42
5.5 Employer's perspective	44
6 Raising the next generation	46
6.1 Cooperation between home and school	46
6.2 Supporting the young and preventing marginalisation	48
6.3 Multilingualism and multiculturalism	49
6.4 Representation matters	50

7 Experiences of the immigration debate	52
7.1 Challenges and opportunities of constructive discussion.....	52
7.2 Encounters and understanding in dialogue	54
8 Conclusions from the Immigration Dialogues	56
Authors	59

PREFACE

Discussing immigration is often perceived as difficult. It is described as tense and exclusionary, a discussion where the participants have to choose their sides even before opening their mouths. Understandably, many feel that they do not want to participate in this kind of discussion – it is easier to stay out of it.

However, discussions and dialogue are a fundamental prerequisite for a strong democracy. Democratic decision-making and the functioning of society require dialogue, even on difficult topics. Particularly on topics as important as immigration, which is a key issue for the development of Finnish society as a whole and for its future.

The public debate on immigration often gets stuck on the same issues: how much or why Finland needs immigration, and who is entitled to move to Finland and who is not. Naturally, these are important questions, but we need to talk about other issues as well, such as what it is like to move and integrate into Finland and, on the other hand, how immigration affects Finnish society. What are the opportunities and challenges related to immigration? How can we support the integration of immigrants into society?

When we talk about immigration, we are talking about people, families, neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces and daily life – the whole of society and its structures. Even from an administrative perspective, immigration does not fit into one or two administrative branches, but cuts across the whole of central government and society. For this reason, the Immigration Dialogues were implemented in cross-administrative cooperation with different ministries.

This compilation of the Immigration Dialogues is a unique description of immigration and the debate on it in 2022. The themes of the compilation are familiar to many working in the field of immigration, and in many cases also ones that the central government has been trying to influence for years. On the other hand, the compilation will surely offer something new to everyone. The exceptional features include but are not limited to the fact that the materials contain the voices of such a wide range of people in different life situations. The issues emerged directly from the people who participated in the discussions, as living experiences and emotions.

The compilation of the Immigration Dialogues provides us with information that can be utilised in the preparation of immigration policy and legislation. Overall, the compilation reveals a society that needs to do much to promote immigration, good population relations and equality. This work requires the input of us all.

Together, for a stronger democracy and a more equal Finland,

Kirsi Pimiä

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of the Interior

Raimo Luoma

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment

Anita Lehikoinen

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Education and Culture

Jukka Salovaara

Permanent State Secretary, Ministry for Foreign Affairs

Juha Majanen

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance

Veli-Mikko Niemi

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

Pekka Timonen

Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Justice

1 Introduction

Arranged in autumn 2022, Immigration Dialogues discussed immigration from the different perspectives of nearly 700 individuals. The starting point for the series of discussions coordinated by the Ministry of the Interior was to increase discussion and understanding of immigration between individuals and groups of people. Another goal was to broaden the overall picture of immigration based on the experiences of people in different life situations who have moved to Finland and people who were born in Finland.

The dialogues also sought a better understanding of what promotes the integration and inclusion of immigrants into Finnish society. The discussions included questions such as: What is it like to move to Finland? How does immigration affect people's everyday lives in Finland? What are the opportunities and challenges related to immigration? How can we support the integration of immigrants into society?

This compilation describes the Immigration Dialogues as a whole, the key topics and perspectives, and, first and foremost, the diverse immigration experiences of immigrants and individuals who were born in Finland. The Immigration Dialogues were conducted with different participant groups: among immigrants, among those born in Finland, and as joint discussions between immigrants and those born in Finland. As a result, the compilation represents the voices of both those who have moved to Finland from all over the world and those born in Finland.

The Immigration Dialogues were organised by a diverse group of organisations, communities and individuals. The discussions took place at locations such as ministries, government agencies, municipalities, organisations, educational institutions, museums and libraries. All in all, individuals from highly different backgrounds participated in the discussions: people who have moved to Finland very recently and, on the other hand, people who immigrated decades ago, people who immigrated for various reasons, from asylum seekers to those who moved for work, as well as people from different language and religious groups. Equally, the discussions involved Finnish-born participants of different backgrounds, from students to public authorities. The discussions were also organised by and involved immigration-related authorities ranging from the Finnish Immigration Service to ministries, numerous professionals working with immigrants and immigration researchers. Parties that are overly critical of immigration did not want to participate in the Immigration Dialogues, despite having been invited.

The range of participants highlighted the diversity of immigration. In public debate, immigration policy appears as work permits and asylum decisions, but it is much more than that. Immigrants living in different life situations have different questions and needs, which means that flexibility in solutions for integration and inclusion is required. Challenges related to the Finnish language, the need to be included in and belong to meaningful communities, finding worthwhile employment and raising the next generation were topics important to nearly all the participants. From the point of view of society, the key questions are how immigrants can become part of Finnish society, how they can build a good life for themselves and their families, and how Finland can thus utilise the potential of immigration.

DIALOGUE ON IMMIGRATION

“Dialogue” refers to a specific way of discussing a topic, aiming at an increased understanding of the topic, other people and oneself. In dialogue, the meaning of matters is explored through the different experiences of individuals. In a dialogue, all perspectives and experiences are valuable in building a better understanding.

Creating a space for dialogue is especially important in the case of socially challenging and tense issues. Constructive discussion and respectful encounters will strengthen trust and equality, thus creating a basis for the mutual resolution of challenges. Dialogue that strengthens understanding, trust and participation, from everyday encounters to decision-making, is required also in immigration issues.

The dialogues were organised using the [Timeout](#) (Erätauko) method, which was created to conduct constructive social discussions. The organisers of the discussions were given an introduction to the Timeout method, as well as support materials for inviting the participants and guiding the discussions. These [materials](#) can be used by anyone to organise their own Immigration Dialogue in the future.

The Immigration Dialogues also serve as a pilot project for the [National Dialogues](#) (Kansalliset dialogit) model developed in Finland. National Dialogues organise nationwide discussion series on topics and phenomena of social significance. Anyone can attend the National Dialogues or organise them.

This summary of the Immigration Dialogues was constructed in a data-driven manner, presenting the content of all 72 discussions and relating them to each other as one extensive dialogue. The text is structured in accordance with the arc of immigration: first, experiences of arriving in Finland are described (Chapter 3), followed by questions related to integration (Chapter 4) and employment (Chapter 5), completed by the raising of the next generation (Chapter 6) and the nature of the immigration debate (Chapter 7). Although the compilation is structured according to the arc of immigration, all sections deal with the experiences of both immigrants and participants born in Finland. The text makes extensive use of quotes from the discussions to include as comprehensively as possible the voices and experiences of the different individuals who participated in the discussions. Finally, we present our conclusions based on the experiences gained from the Immigration Dialogues on what would promote the integration and inclusion of immigrants into Finnish society.

2 Information about the discussions

Discussions: 72

Organisers: 62

Participants: 676

Age of the participants: 8–80 years

The following languages were used in the discussions: Arabic, English, Spanish, Farsi, Chinese, Swedish, Somali, Finnish, Ukrainian, Russian and Estonian.

83% of the discussions included participants who had not previously participated in a similar dialogue.

90% of the organisers felt that there is a need for the Immigration Dialogues and would like to continue to organise them in the future.

The discussions were organised by:

African Care ry, Aretai Oy/DialogueAcademy, Women in AI Finland, COSMO research group/Turku School of Economics, Cultura Foundation, D-station Kallio/Deaconess Foundation, Diakonia University of Applied Sciences, Deaconess Foundation, Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK), Confederation of Unions for Professional and Managerial Staff in Finland (Akava), Finnish Confederation of Professionals (STTK), Timeout Foundation, Espoo Multicultural Children and Youth Association (Espoon Monikulttuuriset lapset ja nuoret ry), Familia ry, Finnish African Society, Finland-Swedish Information and Cultural Centre (Luckan), Bildningsalliansen confederation for non-formal adult education, Harjula Settlement Association (Harjulan Setlementti), IDA project (Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture)/Tampere University, Jawaria Khan, InnoOKcooperative, Sustainable Kaijonharju project, city of Järvenpää/Integration Services, Citizen Association Kansalaisliitto r.p., National Museum of Finland, the Greens in Central Finland, Real Estate Employers (Kiinteistötyöntajat ry), city of Kotka, Kotka-Kymi Parish, LAB University of Applied Sciences, Lieksa Somali Family Association (Lieksan Somaliperheyhdistys ry)/Metkatalo village culture house, Live Foundation, University of the Arts Helsinki, MEH Youth Organisation, multinational

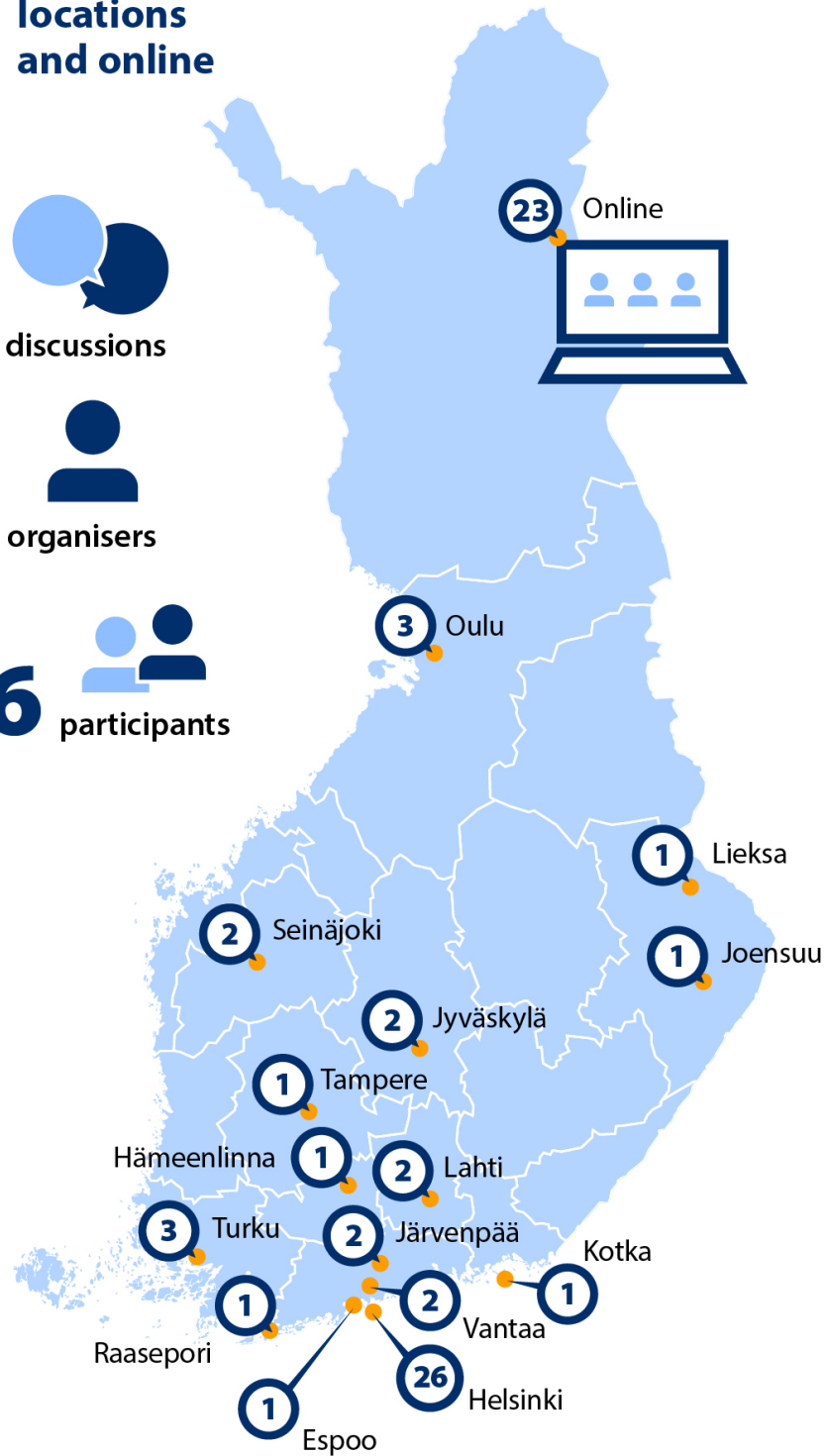
women's wellbeing and physical activity association Monaliiku (Monikansallisten naisten hyvinvointi ja liikunta ry), Multicultural Women's Association MONIKA, family association Monimaa perhe ry/city of Vantaa, University of Jyväskylä, Ministry of Justice, Finnish National Agency for Education, Finnish-Syrian friendship association Suomi-Syyria Ystävyyssseura ry, Ministry of Education and Culture, Sivis Study Centre, city of Oulu immigrant council (Oulun maahanmuuttajaneuvosto), Pasila Library, city of Raasepori immigrant council (Raseborgs Invandrarråd), Red Urufi, Seinäjoki adult education centre, Ministry of the Interior, Finnish Immigration Service, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, Citizens' Forum association for education and culture, multicultural network Moniheli, Finnish Multicultural Sports Federation (FIMU), Finnish Olympic Committee, Finnish Refugee Council, Finnish National Rescuer Association (SPEK), central organisation of Russian speakers in Finland (Suomen Venäjänkielisten Keskusjärjestö), Finland Society, city of Tampere culture service group (Tampereen kaupungin kulttuurin palveluryhmä), University of Turku, University of Oulu Talent Boost, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance/open administration, city of Vantaa, Estonia centre in southwest Finland (Varsinais-Suomen Viro-keskus ry), Welcome2EP project/Trade Union for the Public and Welfare Sectors JHL immigrant network PoVer, TOGETHER association ry and some private individuals.

Discussions were arranged at **15** locations and online

72 discussions

62 organisers

676 participants





The ages of the participants ranged from

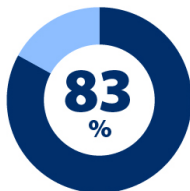
8 to 80



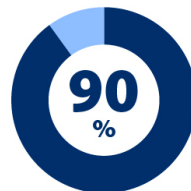
Discussions took place in

11 different languages:

Arabic	Somali
English	Finnish
Spanish	Ukrainian
Farsi	Russian
Chinese	Estonian
Swedish	



of the discussions included participants who had not previously participated in a similar discussion



of the organisers felt that there was a need for the Immigration Dialogues and would like to continue to organise them in the future

3 Arrival in Finland

In the Immigration Dialogues, a huge number of experiences about moving to Finland and, on the other hand, about the changes in society as a result of immigration was shared. In the light of these experiences, Finland appears to those who come here as, on one hand, a country of good life where it is safe and peaceful to live with the support of good services. On the other hand, many participants find Finland a difficult and inward-looking society, where immigrants and their descendants face discrimination and racism. Meanwhile, some of the Finnish-born participants talk about their conflicting feelings about immigration: immigration has made Finland a more diverse and international society, but immigration has also brought with it problems.

The variety of experiences is partly the result of the fact that people come to Finland for many reasons: to study, to work, because of their family or spouse, and for humanitarian reasons. The experiences of individuals without a residence permit, in particular, make it clearly visible how different the living conditions in Finland can be. The participants feel that immigration legislation and the authorities operating within the framework set by it do not always understand the actual life situations of such people. This poses challenges for immigrants, legislators and those applying the law alike.

3.1 The good life in Finland

“Finland is a safe country,” say many of the participants. Those who have moved to Finland particularly appreciate the well-functioning society, which can be easily taken for granted by those born in Finland. As examples of the functioning society, the participants mention healthcare and social welfare services, kindergartens, child benefit, pensions and unemployment benefits. The well-functioning, peaceful and rule-based society helps people in the planning of their lives and future. *“I think it’s a good life in Finland. Free school, free health services. It’s a fun life with the family,”* says one of the participants.

Some of the participants were living in their former home countries in the midst of war, and these experiences continued to affect them for years and decades: *“There was a war in my country when I was a child. It still affects my mind and dreams. I’ve been here for 15 years, and now I have peace. Every morning I pray for continued peace in Finland.”*

Free education is a source of gratitude for many participants: *“Because in my home country, school is expensive if you have a lot of children. You have to buy school uniforms and books every year. Then you can’t afford to send all the kids to school.”* Another participant explains that *“in Finland, when children go to school, their parents don’t have to think about it. No need to buy books, uniforms or pens. No lunch preparation. Schools in my home country are expensive and private. Here, the parent wakes the child up in the morning and the child is ready for school.”*

The low hierarchy in Finnish society amazes some of the participants: *“Here you can have a leisurely conversation with people, even a minister, on the jogging path. Titles are not important.”* And even though *“not everyone is treated equally, of course, and things happen, but all in all, the system is built in such a way that you feel that you are no worse than anyone else and that the law is the same for everyone”*. One participant thinks that *“I really feel that a lot of things are being done here for people and therefore also for me. I don’t want to say that everything is perfect. But the longer you live, the more problems you see. Nevertheless, the feeling is still there that this kind of respect is ingrained in the system, that you are still respected as a human being and they are still trying to treat you right.”*

The freedom to express one’s views in Finland is important for the participants: *“I never had the feeling in my previous home country that I was part of society, that I could influence something, that my voice mattered, that if I suddenly expressed my opinion on something, it would be my opinion and I’d be entitled to it. And if I sit in my kitchen and berate Sanna Marin because I don’t like something, I have the right to do so in my kitchen and it won’t make me a bad person.”* In this connection, the position of women in Finland is also considered to be good: *“You don’t need a man to speak for you. You can speak for yourself, you can decide for yourself.”*

Many speakers are attracted by Finnish nature and proximity to nature: *“I love being close to nature. We pick berries in the woods. My daughter can walk alone in the yard. It’s safe. This was not possible in my former home country.”* Others have had similar negative experiences in their home countries: *“I remember when I wanted to go into the woods, to pick something, to look for flowers. I was told not to go there, it’s dangerous, there are scary people, there are killers, and so on.”* In Finland, the forest has become a safe haven for many.

Over the years, Finland has begun to *“feel like home – clean, beautiful, bright, nature, lots of nature”*. A participant who has travelled a lot *“was so happy to get back to Finland. It was minus three degrees Celsius here. This is my country. It smells right, it’s clean. I’m home, it’s my home, I’m home. I came back and realised how important it is for me to live here.”* Those who have lived in Finland for a longer time have also noticed how *“Finnish society has experienced a tremendous change as comes to the perception of foreigners. I came*

here when there was practically no one here, no Finnish courses, nothing. Finnish society has changed enormously in 25 years. Finland has become such a global country.” Although Finns have a reputation for being withdrawn and quiet, one of the participants says that “despite how many people say that Finns are withdrawn, I’ve met very open Finns during my journey who opened their doors for me, invited me in, welcomed me, offered me tea and coffee”.

Many participants think that as Finland has welcomed them and their families, it is now their turn to do something for Finland. One participant who fled from the unstable situation in their previous home country with their family and made a dangerous trip to Finland that took years describes their experience as *“needing to do something good for society”* and *“wanting to do something good in terms of immigration”*. Nowadays, they advise and guide people who have moved to Finland. Many people who have received support from society are now grateful taxpayers: *“When I came to Finland, I got a lot of help, my children went to kindergarten, school, and now they work. For many years Kela paid me. I got a lot of help, and I’m so grateful for it. Now the children are working and pay taxes.”* One attendee says, *“My husband has a company of his own, and he is so proud to pay taxes. I get to go to hospital because we pay taxes, the children have been allowed to go to school and the grandchildren have been born safely. I’m proud that we are paying taxes because that’s what offers us security.”*

Many of the people born in Finland who participated in the Immigration Dialogues felt that immigration had enriched Finland. Some see immigration as an age-old phenomenon in which people who have moved from Finland to other countries have also played a part: *“Wasn’t America created by people who went there to work, a melting pot of nations, as I understand it?”* Over the past twenty years, the pace of immigration to Finland has accelerated and its nature has become more diverse. Many of the Finnish-born participants have immigrant friends, colleagues or acquaintances. For others, contact had been limited to casual encounters: *“The most common contact is a Wolt courier.”*

Many of the participants thought that Finland offered good opportunities for those coming here, but more questions arise as the number of arrivals increases. How many immigrants can be admitted to Finland and still ensure that there is enough support, services and opportunities for everyone? Does it matter which countries the people are coming from and what their reasons for leaving are? Do we have the courage to speak openly about the problems caused by immigration?

3.2 Difficult Finland

“I have lived in many countries, but Finland was the most difficult country to move to.”

For many newcomers, Finland can also be a difficult and closed society. This characteristic was recognised by both those who have immigrated for various reasons and those born in Finland. Finnish society can be a difficult place to understand for both highly educated people recruited to work here and asylum seekers. Many immigrants had a preconceived notion of Finland as a *“land of opportunity”* and *“a place where everyone is welcome”*. But the reality turned out to be different: *“The possibilities are very limited if you don’t speak the language.”* It is difficult to get to know Finns, loneliness can be a problem and finding your own place is a challenge.

The loneliness will be further emphasised if your family cannot come to Finland or your spouse is not granted a residence permit: *“My marriage broke down because my spouse was not granted a residence permit. This affected my mental health and wellbeing, and continues to do so.”* For many couples and families, residence permit issues are subject to a lot of uncertainty: *“First, you wait to see if you can live in the same country. When you get the permit, you have to go through all the red tape. Then you have to wait to get a job before you can start a family.”* Another says it was not possible for them to get a residence permit based on family ties as they were not married, even though you would think that nowadays *“people are more open and travel more, and meet each other in different places.”* Some people also wondered that *“Finland says it needs more babies and the birth rate needs to be increased, but the country doesn’t provide any support for multicultural couples.”* Many people ask why family reunification is so difficult in Finland. One participant is amazed at the fact that even though they have studied Finnish history, served in the military, learned the local customs and been in a relationship with a Finnish citizen, they still received a negative decision when applying for a visa for their mother. *“Why? I can’t go back to visit my mother. The embassy said that we could meet in a third country.”*

One participant says, *“I have lived in many countries, but Finland was the most difficult country to move to. There’s so much bureaucracy, and everything takes so long.”* The participants’ experiences are that they have queued endlessly in different agencies, it took months to get an appointment with the Digital and Population Data Services Agency and the police, and the authorities do not cooperate with each other or know of each other’s processes. *“I was able to register my place of residence after a couple of months, by which time the residence permit had already expired and the police could not issue a personal identity code,”* says one of the participants. Another participant is in a situation where the

TE Office says that they need to apply for four jobs per month, but they do not have a valid residence permit or a bank account. No one has been able to tell them what to do. Waiting for months for the permit processes feels *“like putting your life on hold”*.

Finns are used to taking care of their errands online, *“but don’t understand that it’s difficult for immigrants to get to that point”*. This makes it difficult to manage one’s affairs in a situation that is already stressful. *“Why is a residence permit not accepted as proof of identity when opening a bank account? There should be a faster way to get an identity card so that the immigrant could get a bank account and move forward with the integration,”* ponders one of the participants. Without the possibility to manage your affairs online, one must queue on the phone or at the office. Sometimes that is not possible, either: *“I would’ve wanted to go to the tax office to sort things out in person but when I called them, they forbade me from coming.”*

Some participants dubbed a situation in which an immigrant, for one reason or another, is unable to obtain online banking credentials and is therefore unable manage their affairs as ‘digital exclusion’. *“It’s been a shock that everything here needs to be confirmed through your bank. You have to have a bank account to exist in Finland,”* says one of the participants. These problems affect both highly educated people who have immigrated for work and people who have arrived in Finland for humanitarian reasons.

Even the dark and cold weather takes some getting used to: *“When I arrived in February, the cold was unprecedented. I didn’t know anyone, and my clothes were not suitable for the Finnish winter. Such a simple thing as how to dress for the winter may be overlooked, but it has huge significance. It may be logical for Finns, but when you come from a tropical climate, you don’t know much about winter clothes.”*

Returnees, i.e. those who have left Finland, may also experience a culture shock when moving back to Finland after years or decades. The discussions paint an introverted image of Finns: *“People are not helpful here. If you don’t ask for help, you won’t get any. People are kind of cold. They are not aware of their fellow human beings. This is reflected in daily interactions.”* One participant feels that *“it’s terribly rude here when no one says hello or anything to anyone on the street”*. Another says that it has been difficult for them to adapt to Finland because Finns lack genuine interest in people from other countries.

From the point of view of identity, moving to a new country shakes a person deeply: *“I’ve had to move to a completely different environment all the time, several times, and it’s honestly such a meat grinder that you get messed up and completely change every time. And as a result of such moving, you become a completely different person.”* When moving to a new country, one’s social capital is reset to zero: *“In my case, I lost not only my professional circle but also a circle of like-minded people, my circle of friends, when I*

moved here. When we moved here, I had practically nobody here." The participants describe how *"the process is mentally very difficult."* A participant who fled their home country as a teenager sums up their experiences as follows: *"The past was erased. Where was the person I was two months before?"*

3.3 Two castes of immigrants

"It's more acceptable to come here to work than as a refugee."

It was noted during the discussions that not all immigrants are in a socially equal position when they arrive in Finland: *"It's more acceptable to come here to work than as a refugee."* Highly skilled specialists are desirable, while people who do other type of work or are fleeing persecution, for example, are unwanted. Those from the global north, seeking work, are seen in a positive light as *"expatriates"*, while those coming from elsewhere are *"immigrants"*.

The participants feel that people moving from the EU are discussed in a more positive light than people coming from third countries, and one asks: *"Why is it so much easier for me as an EU citizen than for those coming from outside the EU?"* Another has the experience of *"being treated differently if you say your husband is from England as compared to Iran"*. There is also a hierarchical classification between different immigrant groups: *"We are immigrants, but we are the better immigrants, and that's why we have the right to get jobs."*

Many of the participants, both those born in Finland and those who have moved here, are proud of how Finns have been willing to help Ukrainians fleeing the war. At the same time, however, *"double standards have become clearly visible, which is irritating"*. By double standards they mean that *"in Finland, we see the pain of white people but when people came from Iraq in 2015, it was called an 'immigration crisis' or a 'wave of immigrants', and people questioned whether they really had an emergency there."* Also on the labour market, Ukrainians are seen as an *"opportunity"*, while others who come for humanitarian reasons are treated as *"price tags on society"*. Some say that *"the free bus pass given to Ukrainians, an advantage not given to all other immigrants, has stirred up resentment among immigrants"*.

We all want to be treated *"humanely and with dignity"*, the dialogue participants note. For the participants, humanity and respect for human dignity also mean that *"we must help refugees because they are refugees"*. Meanwhile, *"it's important to recognise the differences*

in people's situations so that we don't treat people in different situations in the same way". In immigration, "there is a whole rainbow of different nuances about who you are and why you are here".

3.4 Experiences of racism

"A passer-by hit me on the shoulders, spat on me and said, 'Get out of Finland.'"

In many discussions, Finnish society is described as "homogeneous" and "nationalistic". "It's very difficult to be something else in Finland," describes one of the participants. Another ponders: "Maybe it's fear of strangers and the unknown." The Roma and Sámi have also suffered from this: "Only now, over the last 20 years, have we somehow tried to understand that these people are our equals."

The participants wonder whether being Finnish means excluding others: "I'm like this, and you can't be like this". The weight of history is also passed down from one generation to the next: "The war between Russia and Finland, for example, has caused prejudice that has been carried on to the present day, from ancestors to children and grandchildren". At this point in time, Russian's aggressive warfare in Ukraine is affecting people's attitudes: "I've lived in this country for the past 30 years thinking that we are still progressing, moving towards a better future, also for our children, despite some difficulties. That there is no longer this rigid border between Finns and Russians, which was there 30 or 70 years ago when my mother came to Finland. But now I'm scared."

People from different ethnic and religious backgrounds have numerous experiences of everyday racism. The status of an employee at the workplace is questioned due to the colour of their skin; a talented athlete is not allowed on the field; a security guard follows a black young customer at a store. Even people with children are treated inappropriately, and a small child gets told that parents have forbidden their child from playing with brown-skinned people. People are asked about why they are here, and are told to go away. "It seems that the value of an immigrant is different," one of the participants sums up these experiences.

Some participants have also experienced physical violence. "I was on my way to a Finnish language course when a passer-by hit me on the shoulders, spat on me and said, 'Get out of Finland,'" says one participant. Another participant who made a difficult and violent journey to Finland and arrived in the country as a quota refugee, says that "all my images of Finland collapsed. I got punched. This was the second time I was punched because I was an immigrant. No one intervened. The police saw it, but only said 'no can do'"

The participants also describe racism between different immigrant groups: *“There is also a fear of other immigrants who have come from different cultures, for example. Other immigrants are not always accepted in the immigrant circles.”* Discrimination can therefore occur even within minorities, and it can be caused by many things: *“We have noted hostility towards transgender people and sexual minorities, for example, which seems to be more pronounced among people with an immigrant background.”* The everyday life of a person belonging to a gender minority who has immigrated to Finland can be filled with *“confusion caused by your own gender identity, on top of the possible cultural pressures and disapproval”*.

Many people born in Finland are also concerned about racism. The participants acknowledge that all forms of racism affect the wellbeing, mental health, inclusion and trust in the future of immigrants and their next of kin: *“When you experience racist treatment often enough, over and over again, you begin to anticipate it and prepare for it, and over time this tends to become a massive burden on the person that makes everything in life very difficult, makes you passive, and doesn’t reward or motivate you to try again or recover.”* One of the participants describes how *“it’s extremely hard to have to explain and defend yourself at every turn, to prove your validity and, for example, your innocence and how the prejudice is untrue, and to endure alone the feelings that arise when you’re suspected of an offence for no reason, for instance.”*

Some of the participants also had positive experiences of tackling discrimination: *“Ukrainian parents said that they didn’t want Russian children to study in the same class as their children. The school principal said, ‘Excuse me, but in Finland we offer schooling to everyone. And children are not divided into classes according to nationality.’”* However, it was often felt that Finns do not recognise and acknowledge the existence of racism, because they do not experience it themselves. The struggle with racism *“is always nearly invisible to the white Finns because the racism is not directed at them, to the point that they can claim that there is no racism in Finland because the majority of the population doesn’t experience it”*. The participants note that *“when you’re in the majority, it may be difficult to be aware and see when you’re excluding someone.”* Even a well-meaning act, such as praising someone’s Finnish language skills, may imply that they are from somewhere else and not from here.

For some, the terms ‘immigrant’ and ‘people of an immigrant background’ also seem difficult *“because they are not neutral in terms of meaning”*. The participants ask: *“When will someone become Finnish and no longer be an immigrant?”* or *“How many generations of immigrants must there be in your family for you to become a Finn?”* For some, the *“concept of ‘immigrant’ produces a tremendous amount of negative power and energy”* because everybody has their individual life story which the concept eradicates by bundling all people who have moved into the country into one group.

The children of immigrant parents, in particular, feel that *“these words shut us out”*. Talking about children with an immigrant background feels like *“not even the children of immigrants can ever become equal, the same. Even if you were born in Finland, you’re still a foreigner. So that everyone would remember that you are the child of immigrants.”* The result may be that *“if you start talking about children born here as children with an immigrant background, they may not feel like they belong in society, they may be excluded because they do not necessarily feel like they belong anywhere”*.

The participants point out that in addition to language and behaviour, *“prejudice and racism are also reflected in structures and laws, not only as the actions of individuals but also as consistent discrimination and injustice on the basis of the colour of your skin, your name or your native language”*. At the same time, *“racism and the prejudice it contains, which are manifested in structures and as the system’s inequality, injustice and inability to understand the economic benefits of equality, prevent Finland from benefiting from immigration”*.

3.5 Life as a undocumented immigrant

“Being an undocumented immigrant was the worst time of my life.”

The participants also included people who were living or had previously lived in Finland without a residence permit, i.e. as undocumented immigrants. The reality for undocumented immigrants is a life of *“constant fear and secrecy”*, fearing *“detention, repatriation, the police, fines”*.

“There are a lot of asylum seekers among the undocumented. This includes many people who have received their education in Finland and who speak Finnish. Due to bureaucracy, they may not be granted a residence permit because they don’t have a national passport, which cannot be obtained while in Finland,” explains one of the participants. Those who have lived in Finland for a long time already have language skills, social networks and relationships here: *“It would be unreasonable for them to have to go somewhere else and start again. It’s their unique life too, you should always remember that.”*

One participant says that they came to Finland as a minor and tried to fit in, but *“then our permit was revoked”*. They say, *“I have gone to comprehensive school and upper secondary school, had many jobs, but can’t work because I don’t have the right to work. My life’s like a spiral: I get something for a brief moment while I’m in the process, but then it’s taken away. It’s an awful situation.”* They were told, *“Yeah, you have become quite westernised, but as*

you have grown up here in Finland and always lived in an immigrant family, your ties to your country of origin are even stronger than your ties to Finland. Even though you went to upper secondary school here, and comprehensive school."

One person working with people living in Finland without a residence permit wonders, *"We have a lot of customers who have been here for seven years now, but also people who have been here undocumented for a decade. What does it do to a person? It's hard to even imagine such a lack of prospects."* Finding the motivation to study, for example, is difficult *"when you don't see this ever working out"*.

The participants believe that some Finns think that asylum seekers are *"lazy people who just lounge about at home."* But anyone will get tired and passive if, despite trying, they are unable to get a job or start a life. One of the participants describes their previous life situation: *"Being an undocumented immigrant was the worst time of my life. There was no peace, and there was not much I could do. Even after having submitted my application, I had to wait for more than a year for a decision, and during that time I could not work or do anything else worthwhile. My human rights were thrown out of the window."* Integration can only start after a delay of years if one cannot become a customer of the integration services without a residence permit.

3.6 Complex legislation and problems with cooperation between authorities

"More overall consideration and leeway in legislation is required to accommodate people's real-life situations in the interpretations."

Various ministries and the Finnish Immigration Service (Migri) were also involved in the organisation of the Immigration Dialogues. The discussions included people who draft laws, people who process decisions and many other professionals working with immigrants. Many of them feel that *"the Aliens Act is a patchwork"* with which *"even lawyers sometimes struggle"*. One of them describes the legislation as *"a hotchpotch that has evolved over the years and is difficult to keep up with"*. It is difficult to get an overall picture of all immigration-related issues, as the whole has become *"bloated and confusing"*. Meanwhile, guiding the application of the legislation is challenging *"when you have to take into account directives and case law"*. Moreover, in all circumstances, *"Union law and national law do not properly match"*.

One participant describes a challenge related to their work: *“When immigration legislation is applied to a customer who is a person who doesn’t speak Finnish, the challenge lies in communication with the customer and making them understand what is being said. If it’s difficult for the authority to comprehensively resolve matters, then in accordance with the service principle, it can be challenging to inform the customer so that they will understand what is being said.”* Another participant feels that even as a professional, they are *“still after all these years clueless and finding it difficult to advise customers so that they would understand”*.

Many of the challenges arise from the internal inconsistency of the current immigration policy. The participants are calling for a broader view of *“what we want from immigration and how we want to achieve it”*. Related questions include *“Is Migri’s role that of a security authority or an authority that gets more people into Finland?”* and *“Do we want more people to come to Finland at the expense of reducing the quality of investigations?”* Enabling smoother entry on one hand and security on the other may be incompatible: *“The Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment wants employees to come to Finland, which contradicts Migri’s role as a security authority, and the requirements are complicated and difficult to meet in terms of legislation.”*

Erratic government policy also complicates the work of the authorities: *“It’s already annoying me that the next government might make a political turnaround, in which case everything would have to be redone.”* Meanwhile, the authorities are required to prepare good legislation at a tight schedule: *“This contradiction is making our work more and more difficult.”* One participant points out that *“the people working in government agencies are also human. It’s not a machine: the authorities make mistakes too.”*

The Finnish Immigration Service has received a lot of criticism in the public debate in recent years. In the aftermath of the large number of asylum seekers arriving in Finland in 2015, *“critical frustration with Migri’s activities has remained”*. The authorities recognise many problems: *“The permit units are decentralised and don’t talk to each other”*. In the big picture, the different administrative branches also do not talk to each other, and *“this is personified in Migri”*. Also, *“legislation always follows a couple of steps behind in relation to the real situations”* and *“there have been a couple of dozen legislative amendments with contradictory and quite complicated effects”*. It is therefore no wonder that people without a residence permit, for example, feel that they are *“having to play with a moving goal when trying to legalise their residence”*.

The development of new functional solutions is not always in the hands of a single authority. The participants from the Finnish Immigration Service say that *“Migri invests in customer encounters and tries to emphasise that perspective, but can the direction be*

changed when other authorities are also involved in Migri's profiling and the formation of a perception? This can vary from one asylum seeker and applicant to the next, but the experience always culminates in the decision you get."

In terms of the upcoming reform of the Aliens Act, they hope that *"everyone's experiences of the interpretation of the Aliens Act in asylum procedures and residence permit decisions would be compiled"* and *"together we could think about what should be done in the framework of the overall reform of the Aliens Act to make the goal stay in one place"*. The participants wonder about *"the whole permit limbo and the cycle that has evolved in the legalisation processes. Separate solutions must be found for those who came to the country a long time ago and have submitted several applications, as the future legislative amendments won't do anything for them."* The participants say that the difficult processes have resulted in *"people educated and employed here falling into the shadow society, and that carries a price."* We also need to consider situations where people who came here as children *"don't get a permit even though they were brought here as children and are well integrated"*. One of the participants describes how *"in an increasingly technological world, people are disappearing further and further away"*, even though it is *"exactly the meeting of people and the understanding and individual consideration that it creates that would be significant"*.

In general, legislation *"requires more overall consideration and leeway to accommodate people's actual life situations"*. For example, if a person *"wants to 'change lanes', the attitude towards this should be neutral in principle, rather than immediately suspecting the person of foul play. Life situations may change during the immigration process, and there must be room in the system for this."* For example, if the first permit was obtained for health reasons, it seems crazy to tell the customer *"that they shouldn't get better now, as that might lead to them missing their chance to get an extended permit"*.

4 Leverage for integration

Integration was one of the main themes of the Immigration Dialogues. Issues considered important in terms of integration included learning the Finnish language, inclusion, belonging and participation in different communities. The participants shared their experiences of the occasional tough identity work during integration and of integration services, which they would like to see becoming more individual and better taking into consideration the overall life situations of immigrants. In light of the discussions, integration is not just a unidirectional process of adapting immigrants to Finnish society, but it is also a question of learning and opening up society as a whole.

4.1 Integration requires the involvement of society

“Moving to a country is one thing, and becoming part of society and adapting to it is quite another.”

The participants would like to see society contribute more to the integration of immigrants. Currently, integration programmes are described as *“one size fits all”*, even though there is a need for more individualised and customised integration services. *“Different people must have access to different integration paths; not everyone can be integrated in the same way,”* the participants note. *“Successful integration takes time and resources, but if there is an opportunity for individual integration, positive results will be achieved,”* one of the participants believes. *“Integration is not mass production,”* concludes another.

Participants who have undergone integration training state that *“the current integration programme focuses on learning Finnish and accessing the labour market”*. They would like to see more attention being paid to housing, the weather and appropriate clothing, healthcare, banking, leisure activities and the special needs of family members, as well as difficult life situations such as divorce and death. One of the participants says, *“In my opinion, the big problem is that the integration training forgets the person as a whole, including the emotional side. It focuses too much on learning Finnish and is very work-oriented.”* Another states that the current integration programme is not useful for them: *“I speak some Finnish, and my career path does not require more extensive Finnish language skills. I need to focus on other things like my mental health and wellbeing.”* It is often

thought that a person who has moved to the country and is employed and educated has been integrated, but even a person who has moved to Finland to work may be isolated from the rest of society.

New solutions for the organisation of the integration training were hoped so that vocational education and training could be linked to the integration training, and paths to advanced and supplementary studies and working life would come about naturally. *“The integration training leaves a lot to be desired,”* the participants stated, and that is because *“competitive bidding has often led to the selection of the cheapest operator at the expense of training quality. Quality criteria should be included in the competitive bidding.”* One problem is that *“between services, there is a risk of falling through the cracks, and this does not seem effective”*. The risk would be mitigated by a *“personal coordinator supporting the transition from one service provider to another”*.

The participants would also need concrete advice on how to function in Finnish society. Many participants repeated the experience that *“people do not necessarily have knowledge of the system and the laws in Finland”*. In the words of one participant: *“We are not familiar with the law, we do not know our rights. We need more information about being a citizen in Finland.”* Another asks, *“What steps must we take to legalise our status and find a job? How to open a bank account, how to get registered, how to register with the employment office?”* The participants would want a clear-cut list of what to do and in which order. Students in universities and universities of applied sciences would also want from the educational establishment more support in practical matters such as electricity contracts and the use of public transport.

It would also be useful to understand *“why healthcare works in a certain way, and that Finnish healthcare is not poor, even though you don’t call an ambulance in Finland when your child has a fever or even if you are not prescribed antibiotics for every ailment here”*. There is also a need for information on safety and how to act in case of an emergency. *“In addition to other safety topics, immigrants should be told about the prevention of domestic abuse,”* the participants note.

The participants would like for integration programmes to use experts by experience, i.e. for the programmes to be led by people who have immigrated into Finland themselves. *“I believe that integration can only help if it is performed by immigrants. The integration programme in its current form, with the current staff who do not understand what it’s like to be an immigrant, does not help much,”* explains one of the participants. Another participant also states that *“people with a foreign background are the only ones who have an understanding of the challenges and what it’s like to come here. No matter how much*

they would like to, Finns will never fully understand or see it in the same way.” In general, the participants hope that the immigrant population would increasingly play other roles in society other than that of service recipients.

Meanwhile, one of the participants considers that integration is slowed down by the fact that one only meets other immigrants during integration courses: *“Thanks to the integration courses, I have developed a very strong immigrant identity. We take courses with immigrants from different countries, who all speak Finnish poorly, study Finnish (...) and when I see Finns, I understand that this is something else.”* Another speaker has followed *“the integration of Ukrainian children into the Finnish school system”*. They state that *“the programme is excellent for the integration of immigrants and their children. On the other hand (...) there are no Finnish children at this school. They only come into contact with Finnish children once, when they go to have lunch in the building next door, and that’s all.”*

It is also hoped that people without a residence permit were able to access the integration services, as *“Finland is known for justice and equality, and for respecting human rights”*. The participants believe that *“a well-implemented integration programme could have a positive impact on the daily lives of immigrants in Finland and help them reach their full potential.”*

Overall, integration is seen as a *“critical issue to be addressed in a humane and friendly manner”*. As a whole, *“Finland must take integration to a whole new level”* as *“people come from completely different cultures and have completely different political and cultural views”*, according to the participants. A simultaneous question is: *“Is Finland ready for large-scale immigration in the future? Do people understand why immigration and integration are absolutely necessary?”*

4.2 Difficult and important Finnish language

“How difficult is Finnish on a scale of 1 to 10? The difficulty of the Finnish language on this scale is 10.”

Difficulty in learning the Finnish language was a recurring theme throughout the Immigration Dialogues. *“The Finnish language is difficult, which is a source of shame. There’s timidity and shame involved when speaking Finnish,”* one of the participants describes their feelings. In some other countries, *“there is no shame or a feeling that one should be able to speak perfectly. They’ll take you in, you can talk and make mistakes”*, whereas in Finland *“you should be fluent and perfect”*. The participants agree that a supportive atmosphere is important when learning a language, and *“you should just speak, thinking that you’re learning all the time and trying is good”*. *“This is one of the most difficult languages in the world, after all,”* the participants note.

Finnish language skills and the opportunity to learn Finnish influence social relations, functioning in society and the employment of immigrants. People study the language in integration programmes but many *“immigrants are frustrated when the basics of the Finnish language just won’t stick in your mind. There should be a place where you could really hear Finnish.”* For many, that would be a job, but the problem may be the following: *“You are studying the language, not enough places to practice the language. Once you get a little further, the language classes will be over. It’s like you’ve learned enough Finnish, but not enough to get a job.”*

On the other hand, people who have come to work in Finland rarely have time to attend language courses and thereby develop their language skills. Some people find it unfair that *“the courses are aimed at people who are not employed”* so that the only point of reference is full-time language learning. However, even highly educated specialists have difficulties with the language: *“I feel discomfort when I enter a room and others have to switch the language from Finnish to English on my account.”* Most events, workshops and networking events in working life and universities, for example, are in Finnish: *“As an immigrant, I feel left out.”* The public sector also seems to have *“an unspoken resistance towards English”*. Finns trust the authorities and public services, but it may be difficult for people who have immigrated to the country to attain the same level of trust for linguistic reasons.

Integration into Finland can also take place in Swedish. According to the participants, *“Finnish is a very difficult language to learn, so integration in Swedish can be easier”*. The Swedish language also opens up opportunities to live or work in the other Nordic countries, and knowledge of Swedish can help one find employment in areas such as education, training, social welfare and healthcare. The participants hope that more information would be shared on Swedish-language integration, and that experts by experience would also be utilised here, as many people wonder why to choose Swedish as their language of integration: *“Will I get a job then?”* or *“Wouldn’t it be easier to integrate in Finnish after all?”* Some have the experience that *“employers demand that you speak both languages”*. This makes one of the participants angry: *“Finland helps refugees from other countries, but how can they demand that they learn both languages?”*

4.3 Belonging and inclusion in communities

“A stranger becomes familiar, and people’s starting points no longer matter.”

Although the public discussion on integration focuses on integration into Finland, in reality integration always takes place in local communities. One participant ponders how *“responsibility for the success of immigration is much more complex than I thought. It lies with the neighbours, the immigrants themselves, the authorities, communities, schools, customers in the local grocery store, and so on. It’s often a question of creating an emotional climate that supports the immigrant’s self-esteem instead of discouraging them.”* It is important for everyone to feel that they belong to something and become part of social networks: *“Relationships and social networks are the most important resources in the integration into Finnish society and in building a pleasant everyday life”*. Here, different local communities where people meet each other play a central role: kindergartens, schools, sports and exercise clubs, parishes, organisations and associations.

“Being part of a football community was my only model of integration,” says one of the participants. A participant of the retirement age, on the other hand, has *“gained a routine for my days and a sense of belonging to a community through hobbies”*. For one of the participants, a native-language *“kindergarten has helped with the integration”* and *“has provided linguistic and cultural support”*. From this community, he has found other native-speaking fathers, and has *“been able to speak my own native language and share experiences with others about the problems of multicultural families”*.

Several communities organising sports, exercise and leisure activities participated in the Immigration Dialogues, and the importance of leisure activities for immigrants was emphasised in these discussions. The clubs and organisations are already doing *“a good job of supporting immigrants. The operating culture emphasises activities open to all, we cooperate with reception centres, and so on.”* All kinds of *“hobbies are important when working with trauma: you’ll be able to forget the bad things and think about something else”*. One participant describes how *“you can forget about the challenges, mental health problems and trauma when you play. When playing and making music, you feel fine.”*

However, many have observed that in connection with sports, for example, *“there may be some segregation during breaks with immigrants being in their own group and native Finns in theirs”*. In the same way, immigrant parents may stay with their own group, and hardly any immigrant mothers are involved in sports club activities. Getting girls to participate is also a *“special challenge”*. Participants who wear a hijab are sorry *“that a hijab is not allowed in all competitive sports”*. In this regard, it would be a nice gesture to *“allow hijabs from the very beginning so that you’d be able to feel welcome and bring other girls along as*

well". Also, *"separate times reserved for girls and women gives the message that now we can go!"* Especially in the case of swimming, *"there's a huge need for it, because many women want to do it in a gender-sensitive way"*.

However, reaching the target group is difficult for some operators: *"We have organised women's swimming, wishing to see immigrants and other women for whom swimming is not possible otherwise. It's been challenging, but the situation has improved a bit each time."* This requires *"bridge people"*, i.e. individuals who act as connections and messengers between communities. Their role is crucial, as *"not everyone is aware of the organisations they can work with or the associations where they could get help from"*. Meanwhile, *"there are a lot of organisations that could be helpful and would like to meet immigrants, but the information is not getting through."*

The participants note that *"financial support can be crucial"* to enable low-income families to participate in leisure activities, for example. Also to prevent racism, *"more preventive measures and strong intervention are required"*. Fortunately, it is also true that *"when you get to know people through hobbies, it's easier to get rid of prejudice than in working life"*. One of the participants describes it this way: *"There is also humour in hobbies, and common interests make it easy for people to get to know each other. A stranger becomes familiar, and people's starting points no longer matter."*

A lack of language skills can also be an obstacle to participation: *"When I came to Finland, I saw so many advertisements about children's football training, for example. The information was in Finnish only, so I didn't understand what to do for my child to be able to participate in the activities"*. One participant has the experience that *"sometimes I feel that if I attend different groups, I'm a nuisance because I don't speak the language"*. That's why a personal invitations would be important to many, *"and would create a sense of belonging"*.

Many have found that *"it has a big impact when immigrants are involved as adult actors – coaches, guardians, team leaders."* This is why we need more diversity in terms of leaders: *"bad Finnish, headscarf, and so on"*. There is still a long way to go before multiculturalism will appear in the *"boards of clubs, sports federations and umbrella organisations"* or in the imagery of communication related to hobbies, which shows *"white trail runners dressed in tights"*.

The activities of recreational communities must take into account cultural factors, such as the impact of fasting on sports, while treating everyone as an individual. The group of immigrants *"is very diverse and includes people in different life situations – athletes, ordinary people, people with children"*. They must be invited to *"create a reality that looks like them"*.

4.4 Importance of religion

“We talk about culture, but religion is taboo.”

Some participants pondered about the role of religion in integration. Many of the discussion participants feel that *“there is no room for religion in a public context in Finnish society”*. Some immigrants feel that you should not talk about religion in kindergartens, at schools or in connection with youth work, even though it is an important part of the life of many. One of the participants describes how Finland *“gets a lot of immigrants for whom faith was important at home, which can make being in Finland very difficult”*.

“Matters related to religion are not even mentioned in the integration plan,” says one of the participants. *“People talk about culture, but religion is taboo”*, the participants describe the northern European view which excludes the spiritual side of people. In one discussion, this is described as *“violent hospitality, that you have to give up many things if you want to become a part of society”*. At the same time, *“loneliness and insecurity will come to the foreground if there’s no opportunity to be part of one’s own religious community”*. Even within the social welfare and health care services, representatives of different faiths do not always have equal access to spiritual support, while many feel that, for example, *“in hospital, when you have access to spiritual support, it creates security.”*

Meanwhile, some participants are fascinated by the fact that in Finland you can *“switch your religion or live without faith”*. Some of them have not been able to openly practice their religion in their previous home country, but now it *“feels safe in Finland”*. Integration can also lead to intergenerational conflicts *“when your family has integrated and your child no longer wants to be a part of your religion, and then it seems like the system is unconsciously guiding them towards atheism”*.

One participant describes how *“sometimes it happens that people aggressively ask why you are a Muslim”*. They believe that *“it’s good that we are talking about things together, that we are celebrating the festivals of different religions together”*. One of the participants describes it this way: *“For me to appreciate the sacred things of others, I’d have to know what they are, and I too should have the opportunity to point out the things that are sacred to me.”*

4.5 Integration in two directions?

“Should Finns be integrated into accepting immigrants into their society?”

The Immigration Dialogues clearly showed how integration can be easily understood as a unidirectional process in which the immigrants learn to function in Finnish society. However, many think that integration should be reciprocal: *“Immigrants are given an integration programme upon entry, but society as a whole should be given one”*. Another participant goes on to say that *“integration is never one-sided for me – society, in which you live, should also learn from you and be open-minded”*.

The bidirectional nature of integration is compared to a heart transplant by one of the participants: *“We have a patient, in this case Finland, who needs a new heart. We have medical professionals, and we have a new heart: immigrants. The body rejects the new heart, which is why we need anti-rejection medication. This is the important role that integration plays. The body and the heart must work together.”* That is why the important question is: *“Should Finns be integrated into accepting immigrants into their society?”*

However, the term ‘integration’ (or ‘kotouttaminen’ in Finnish) raises some criticism: *“A refrigerator can be integrated into a kitchen; you shouldn’t use the word integration when talking about people.”* One participant says that *“integration is a disgusting word, I don’t like it at all. It sounds like: we government people are here making decisions for you, this is what is good for you, you have to obey our rules and then you’ll become integrated.”* Many would find it more sensible to use terms such as ‘kotoutuminen’ (feeling at home) or ‘mukaan ottaminen’ (inclusion).

“When you start to feel at home, you absorb some things from the new country, while preserving cultural traits from your country of origin,” one of the participants describes. However, the relationship between integration, adaptation or acculturation is a concern to many: *“This is my home, this is my country. Meanwhile, I don’t want to lose my language or my culture. Integration doesn’t mean that I have to adapt. So for me it’s not a question of acculturation, but of preserving my identity.”* This means that *“integrating and at the same time remaining yourself is what you want. How can you achieve this? The big question is not clear to me. It’s also hard because I can’t give up a part of myself.”* Another participant asks: *“Who am I? I’ve lived here for a little over ten years, but I can’t say I’m Finnish. No, not in any way. But at the same time, when I go to my former home country and talk to my friends, I realise that I’m not Russian either. So, I’m somewhere in between.”* Participants who were born in Finland and have lived in other countries along the way have also wondered the same.

According to one participant's experiences, *"all integration courses teach all immigrants a certain kind of conception of Finnish society. It's as if Finnish society is not changing at all. We're being taught what society was like yesterday or the day before, and it turns out that we're always being integrated into the past."* It is problematic *"if we understand Finnish society as something coherent, harmonious, unchanging, then we're talking about integration as a process that places others in this Finnish society"*.

According to the participants, *"there is no single Finnish culture that we should integrate into, it's constantly changing, we're building a culture together so that everyone's voice can be heard"*. That is why it is important to ask: *"How can we achieve integration that doesn't melt one culture into another, but preserves it as a richness in society?"* To this end, we must look towards the future: *"Maybe we should all look ahead and think about the future of this society. We all have a shared future, and we should build it together."*

5 Employment and related challenges

The employment of immigrants is an important social issue, which is also reflected in the content of the Immigration Dialogues. The discussions highlighted the experiences of jobseekers and immigrants in various occupations, complemented by the views of Finnish employers. Immigrants face a wide range of barriers to employment: a lack of language skills and networks, difficulties with work permits, challenges in reconciling work with family life, as well as prejudice and discrimination. According to the experiences of the participants, the recognition of the competence of immigrants is also rigid and inadequate. Employers, on the other hand, are considering the various risks and cumbersome administrative processes related to the hiring of an immigrant, as well as the management of diverse work communities. Both immigrants and those who were born in Finland would like to have more room for the dreams and aspirations of the newcomers, instead of them being treated as a resource to fill the labour shortage of an ageing country.

5.1 Immigrants as a solution to the labour shortage

“Is a foreign worker a commodity or a human being?”

The participants state that *“the ageing of the population is changing Finnish society”*. The birth rate is falling, and *“the dependency ratio is not sustainable”*. Against this backdrop, *“no one can deny anymore that there is a need for immigration”*. However, many of the participants criticise the way immigrants are seen only as a resource that will make up for Finland’s labour shortage: *“Sadly, immigrants are often referred to as the people who’ll come and take care of the elderly and keep everything clean. We should market Finland better so that people would come here to work and raise a family in a safe country, to participate in the welfare society.”*

One participant describes that *“when immigrants are referred to as a labour force, they are seen as a tool that Finland needs and without which the country can’t cope”*. This means that *“we are a workforce, a tool, a thing that Finland can use. And when you no longer need it, you can just throw it away.”* One of the participants is of the opinion that *“Finnish society doesn’t really care about the quality of the integration offered to immigrants. If I can*

... speak Finnish and clean, drive a car, distribute ads or do other work that they cannot do themselves, they are fine with me. They don't care about my career aspirations or dreams, they don't care if I'm happy or not. They just want my services."

Meanwhile, the talk of employers and the government about the need for labour confuses many immigrants living in Finland. *"I've been looking for work for seven years and haven't received a single phone call,"* one participant wonders. *"People complain about the lack of skilled labour, but at the same time people are discriminated against,"* says another. According to the participants, it would be better to look at those who are already here instead of attracting *"another batch of foreigners into the country"*. One participant explains how *"the city's papers say that work-based immigration is being promoted. It should be the other way around, in other words, promoting the employment of immigrants"*. *"If those who have already moved here are not well and can't get their voices heard, there's no point in attracting more labour to Finland!"* sums up another.

5.2 Obstacles to employment

Several participants report that finding employment is difficult for them due to their lack of Finnish language skills: *"There aren't many places where you can work only in English, or get a permanent or better job if you don't speak Finnish."* This applies equally to highly educated and less educated immigrants. They also wish that *"employment were based more on competence than language skills"*. *"So what if our language skills are not perfect? We can bring something else to the table,"* one of the participants points out.

The participants have widely different experiences of learning the language at or alongside work. *"People who have come to Finland because of work are immediately put to work and may not be able to improve their language skills or create other forms of participation in society"*, one of the participants says. It may be impossible for a full-time employee to get a place in or have the time to attend a language course. The implementation method of language courses is perceived as inflexible, causing them to take up a large part of your working hours, which in turn may hinder employment, livelihood or career advancement. On the other hand, a lack of language skills will also slow down career development. Meanwhile, there are those who do not feel the need to learn Finnish because their stay in the country is not permanent.

"The best place to practice your language skills is the workplace", but it is not possible to learn the language at some workplaces. One of the participants says that the whole shift speaks their native language, which is why it *"is difficult to practice. I'd like to speak more Finnish."* In the case of some participants, the employer supports language learning: *"My*

employer pays for a Finnish language course once a week. That's good." This is why the participants propose the following: *"If the employer received state support for language training after hiring."*

There is another employment challenge linked to the language: *"It's difficult for people who have moved to Finland from abroad to find information about jobs in any language other than Finnish, and going from one government website to another only leads to frustration – where are the pages that make it easy for people to find work in a foreign language?"* Finding a job and employment without adequate guidance is considered difficult: *"We need help finding a job because the culture and everything is new. The TE Office, for example, doesn't offer help in searching for a job, but tries to guide you towards a long education path."* Clear instructions and support are also required for starting one's own business and becoming an entrepreneur.

Immigrants can face challenges especially in industries where employment is based on networks. A musician who has moved to Finland explains how difficult it was to find professional networks in Finland. A student in the field of music who was born in Finland recognises the difficulty to get a job in the industry, if one has not followed the Finnish music education path since childhood: *"It's a real shame, because we're wasting great opportunities by not opening up the industry to newcomers."*

In particular, the participants state that *"the unemployment rate among immigrant women is very high"*. Solutions therefore need to be found *"on how to support simultaneous employment and motherhood"*. Women's low employment rate reflects both *"a double pressure: they should go to work, but they should also have more children"* and *"cultural differences in terms of the maternal values regarding family life and work: which is more important?"*. A participant who works with immigrants in Finland says that many customers wonder *"how they can leave a child home alone in Finland. This comes up all the time. When can a child be left alone?"* It should also be noted that some immigrant women live without any income of their own and are bound to their home with their children. Therefore, providing *"opportunities to have a babysitter or to be involved even if you have children"* would be important.

The participants also emphasise the fact that immigrants need *"more practical information about working life and the rules, so that there would be no surprises at the workplace"*. *"Newly arrived workers are in a completely different position than others. I compare them to young people who have no work experience yet,"* says one of the participants. Another continues: *"Once a person has arrived in Finland, they are truly dependent on their employer for the first year. It easily happens that when you're new to the Finnish labour market, you'll work the worst shifts without keeping tabs of your working hours. It would be important for people to know their rights from the very start."* A participant shares their experiences: *"As a*

first-year employee, I was unfamiliar with Finnish law, the terms and conditions of the trade union, and we were exploited by, for example, having us work too long shifts. Some people were afraid to leave the bad employer because they were being threatened and thought that the poor working conditions were the norm."

In Finland, there must be *"proper mechanisms for eliminating labour exploitation"*. For example, people living in Finland without a residence permit often have problems with their working conditions and wages, because *"the undocumented don't have the right to work at all, but this does not prevent them from working and they work off the book, without any security and being exposed to human trafficking"*. The participants hope that Finland will not go on to have a *"labour market of two or three tiers"* where undeclared work was done under poor conditions.

However, challenges related to work permits are familiar to many of the participants: *"The process of obtaining an employed person's residence permit is difficult and lengthy. You may have a job available when you're undocumented, but you might lose it as the process drags on."* One of the participants says that *"passport requirements also restrict access to a residence permit; for example, a Somali passport is not recognised in Finland"*, which means that *"in practice, a Somali passport cannot currently be used to obtain an employed person's residence permit"*. The participants also note that *"there are conditions attached to the employed person's residence permit such as the place of work being in a certain industry"*. It would be easier if the industry-based *"eligibility assessment could be revised if there's an employer able to offer a job"*. The entire *"process of obtaining the right to work should also be secured so that it wouldn't fail because of small things such as problems with the employer submitting a specific report"*.

5.3 Prejudice and discrimination in working life

"They think that a foreigner can't do the same as a Finn."

According to the experience of the participants, there is a great deal of discrimination in Finnish working life based on name, language skills, ethnic background and skin colour, affecting both highly educated and less educated immigrants. *"In the labour market, immigrants have lots of skills, they may be better qualified than a Finnish applicant, but a foreign name affects the selection process. It's depressing and makes you give up,"* says one of the participants. *"There is also discrimination even if you were born in Finland but have a foreign name,"* confirms another.

“Everybody thinks that a foreigner can’t do anything. It’s prejudiced. They think that a foreigner can’t do the same as a Finn,” the participants describe. Customers may require *“a cleaner or janitor who speaks Finnish, even though the task does not require any Finnish language skills”*. Sometimes, *“a customer will tell you outright that they won’t have a black person clean for them”*.

Many feel that *“immigrants are expected to work many times harder than white Finns”*, and *“their career development is still non-existent”*. In some industries, there are no foreign workers at all. One participant feels that *“there are no interesting prospects professionally unless you’re a Finn. You can say anything you want about equality, but if you’re not Finnish, you don’t stand a chance.”*

5.4 Qualification requirements and recognition of competence

“Even if you have a university degree, you’re a baby in Finland. You have to go back to school and start all over again.”

In addition to the obvious discrimination, there was a lot of talk in the Immigration Dialogues about how poorly Finland recognises skills gained elsewhere. *“There is a complete lack of qualification recognition in the case of immigrants. They just ask if you have any language skills, do you have B1”*, describes one participant. The participants share the experience that *“even if you have made an extensive career for yourself abroad, you often have to start from scratch in Finland”*. One participant sums it up: *“Even if you have a university degree, you’re a baby in Finland. You have to go back to school and start all over again.”*

Many of the participants described the negative effects the disparagement of one’s competence has. One of them says: *“It’s not possible to have foreign qualifications recognised here. For example, my mother’s law degree is worth nothing in Finland. The workload you need to put in to have your degree accepted is so huge that it’s depressing. The language skill requirements are high and there are no jobs available with your certificate.”* Another describes how his wife *“has tried to have her degree validated here for 14 years. That’s exactly half of her adult life. For half her life, she has tried to have her diploma validated and tried to prove in Finland that she has the right to work here, even though she’s a highly valued professional. But the state as a system refused to recognise it on purely bureaucratic grounds.”* A third one talks about their father, who had *“five degrees and spoke seven languages, but he was not allowed to say this. You’re overqualified, you can*

go work as a cleaner. He didn't go to the TE office after that." Much can be summed up in the statement of one participant: *"Must be a very attractive country; 20 years to get into the same job you had before."*

A participant who works with immigrants describes from the point of view of their work how *"we talk about getting them to work quickly, getting them employed fast, doing anything as quickly as possible, also in customer work we sometimes think that we should just get them to work as quickly as possible, how we could achieve both at the same time"*. Meanwhile, many immigrants who have previously done specialist work think that *"the starting point is, in principle, disparaging (...), we don't think about the social class; if you are a teacher moving here, you'll be immediately squeezed into a lower social class, it's clearly subjugation"*.

Many participants wonder why *"immigrants always have to be offered a job as a practical nurse or a bus driver"*, or *"why there are only cheap jobs for refugees and immigrants, only as cooks or construction workers. Why can't I work as an artist?"* Many people feel that their own hopes and career ambitions do not matter, even though *"people must have the right to dream"*. Of course, you must be realistic, *"but not everyone needs to become a practical nurse"*.

The derogatory attitude leads to a lack of perspective for many: *"Immigrants get depressed by the difficulty of finding a job and become angry with society."* That is why we *"should have a system for recognising competence"*. The problem is that *"many people have skills and competence, but no official certificate of them. They may have acquired the skills in their country of origin through, for example, a family business. This is where the Finnish bureaucracy comes in when you should be able to demonstrate your skills and competence during the recruitment process, which in Finland only occurs through educational institutions."* The focus on degrees seems strange *"because in reality education won't carry the employee throughout their career, and learning often takes place for the rest of their life at work"*.

The participants wonder *"if we could have lighter diplomas, like I have a diploma like this, which may not meet the Valvira criteria, but could I still work?"* They also highlight the *"German model"* in which *"you can't work as a registered nurse right away, but you can assist while you are taking a language course to learn the language, so that you would be able to work as a nurse later"*. In general, more flexible models are called for, combining work and study in ways that would allow the recognition of an individual's previous professional skills and make it possible to develop them further.

5.5 Employer's perspective

Several Finnish employers and representatives of employer organisations also participated in the dialogues. The employer often focuses on *“risk aversion and efficiency. An employer may see the recruitment of immigrants as an arduous task and a risk rather than an opportunity, for a variety of reasons. The employer may have questions such as whether the person’s level of competence can be trusted, whether they will be able to cope with the work duties, whether the employer and employee will understand each other, whether there will be problems with work permits and taxes, and whether the employer will really have to support and pay for language courses.”*

The need for labour is often imminent, but when hiring an immigrant, *“the bureaucratic processes involved are long and confusing, taking up too much time”*. For example, it may be *“an impossible task for a supervisor when they may have to wait on the phone for an hour to clarify mandatory matters relating to the employee’s right of to work”*. One participant explains how *“some industries are really restricted. The process of obtaining a new residence permit is costly, and many employers cannot afford to wait for the process to be completed.”* There have even been cases where *“an employment relationship had to be terminated because the permit process took so much time that the work permit expired before the permit to continue the employment relationship was obtained”*. Employers may also *“fear sanctions that may ensue no matter how well you try to deal with the affairs”*. Unfortunately, *“employers on the whole do not always receive enough information about when the right to work may cease, and the sanctions they face can be very severe”*.

The everyday life of a work community *“requires employers to have the stamina to explain to workers with an immigrant background how the code of conduct is reflected in Finnish working life”*. *“Cultural clashes, such as female leadership, are sometimes challenging to understand,”* says one participant, *“and cultural differences can also be reflected in the interpretation of safety”*. From the employer’s point of view, the language skills of job seekers with an immigrant background are also a challenge: *“If you don’t speak any Finnish, the customers won’t be able to work with you. It’s an obstacle to recruitment.”*

Even participants working in international companies had noticed a reluctance to speak English within the company *“even though it’s the company’s working language”*. Likewise, universities market themselves as international *“but the reality is far from this”*. According to the experience of the participants, many universities are not multilingual in reality, and *“the Finnish language still plays a huge role in all matters ranging from teaching to in-house meetings”*. The participants call for more student exchange and international staff in universities for both research and teaching positions and in administration. They want

universities to have relevant internationalisation strategies that would guide people with an immigrant background in integration at the different stages of their career, as well as uniform practices between institutions and units to support them.

It is clear that *“managing a diverse work community requires new skills, flexibility and continuous learning from supervisors”*. Supervisors need cultural and linguistic training because they *“need to have a better understanding of different cultural backgrounds”*. The participants would also like to see employers being offered *“support, training and concrete incentives”* for hiring immigrants. The government could show *“by its own example how to recruit in an inclusive and non-discriminatory manner”*. Furthermore, *“prejudice should be broken and responsiveness boosted”*.

One participant suggests that *“rather than as a risk, an immigrant should be seen as an opportunity because they are likely to be very persistent and highly tolerant of stress, having reached Finland to have a job interview”*. Another believes that good treatment of employees with a foreign background can constitute a competitive advantage: *“Word will spread that we take good care of people.”* The participants point out that *“if you never hire that first immigrant, you’ll never have any good experiences”*.

6 Raising the next generation

Immigrants are raising a new generation in Finland, and children and young people were discussed in the Immigration Dialogues from the perspective of education and culture, for example. According to the experiences of the participants, cooperation between home and school is not always without problems, and some young people identify with gangs and a culture of violence. They hoped that multilingualism and cultural diversity could be maintained in families. Both immigrant participants and those born in Finland reflected on what kind of concrete and symbolic spaces for multiculturalism could be built in people's everyday lives and communities.

6.1 Cooperation between home and school

Many of the participants who have immigrated to Finland say that compared to their former home countries, *"Finland is a very different country in terms of schools, too"*. Discussions on cooperation between the home and the school indicate that *"cooperation between the home and the school is extremely challenging at times"*. Parents who participated in the discussions noted: *"I don't know what my rights and obligations are in relation to the children and their schooling"* or that in their previous home country, *"I felt that I could follow their schooling, but here I feel excluded and I don't know what is going on"*.

The language adds a layer of challenge to the cooperation between the home and the school: *"There's always a language barrier between the home and the school."* The parents often talk to the teacher through an interpreter, and interpreters are *"a particularly important part of successful cooperation"*. It is not always possible to get an interpreter, however. Communication through the teaching and learning platform Wilma also poses some challenges if the messages are left unread or are not understood: *"Wilma may not always be the best communication channel, as some parents do not speak Finnish to a level where they could understand the language used in the messages. This causes frustration on both sides."*

In general, *"when you don't understand something, conflicts can arise very easily, and most often they are caused by a misunderstanding. Quarrels between the children are also often caused by something not being understood or a misunderstanding, or because they don't know how to say something nicely because of their underdeveloped language skills."* On the other hand, *"building and maintaining mutual understanding and trust are particularly*

important for cooperation and for doing the work that ultimately focuses on the wellbeing of children". Building a mutual understanding is also required in the case of cultural differences that are visible in daily life: "Parents forbid the children from taking off their clothes outside the home, such as in the shower room at school or a public swimming pool. The school, on the other hand, practices hygiene education according to the curriculum."

A participant working as a teacher states that *"the current Finnish teacher education is not able to meet the needs of foreign-language children to a sufficient extent. Schools have too few resources to support families, even though the teachers would want to do more."* According to them, work still needs to be done among the teaching staff in *"matters related to attitudes, the recognition of racism and unconscious prejudice"*. The participants have found that *"there are differences in the structure of schools in terms of how inclusion and specifically the inclusion of foreign-language pupils is supported"*. One participant wonders *"why the school can't take the first step, like call the parents to offer help and support"*. Meanwhile, positive experiences are also shared about how *"teachers have been very helpful and even helped to apply for family reunification"*.

Some families may even be afraid to cooperate with the school and the authorities. One of the participants fears: *"If someone notices I've done something wrong, will someone take away my children?"* Another fears that *"child welfare will take my child if there's a dispute over restricting the use of their mobile phone"*. Internet use is a source of conflict in many families. Parents find it problematic that they *"can't control their time on the web when the school gives them a device to take home with them"*, *"when everything is on the phone and the books are digital"*. A parent's language skills are not always sufficient to keep track of what a child is doing online. In this case, multilingual tutors at school may be useful: *"Do you know what your son is doing with his mobile phone? Do you know what your child is doing online?"* Some positive aspects of using the web are also recognised: *"There you can learn a language, Finnish and English, and different dialects of your own language"*.

Participants who approach the cooperation between families and schools from a different perspective agree that good cooperation requires more support on both sides. The lack of a common language is part of the problem, and the language barrier can be lowered by using interpreters. However, language skills will not solve everything; a shared understanding of the operating methods at home and school, the role of the parents and teachers, as well as cultural practices is also required.

6.2 Supporting the young and preventing marginalisation

“I feel unsafe and I fear for my child.”

Some of the discussions focused on marginalisation and gangs consisting of young people from immigrant families. The participants were concerned about the increase in violence between young people and the glorification of a culture of violence: *“Normal young people are afraid and carry knives.”* Some people think that *“we’re heading towards the situation in Sweden and Denmark”*. When it comes to gang forming, *“there’s a king in the crowd who threatens others. Some of those around them are reluctantly involved.”* Violence *“easily leads to a vicious circle of revenge”*, and the use and sale of e-cigarettes and drugs also predispose young people to violence *“as weapons are used in debt collection”*. In situations like this, the parents also *“feel unsafe and fear for my child. We are always concerned about the safety of our children.”* An individual can become a victim even if they are not in a gang.

One participant describes how *“violent situations at school are aggravated by the fact that young people translate Wilma messages to their parents who don’t speak the language”* which means that the parents *“don’t receive factual information about the behaviour of the youth”*. According to the participants, *“every school needs someone to finish the job and resolve these cases”*. In a situation where *“there is no time or the required abilities at school, child welfare is not available and psychiatric services for the young are congested”*, the proposed solution is *“coeducation”*, where the parents work together and a representative of the family’s own culture or community is also involved in the resolution of the situation. *“But on the other hand, respect for parents has decreased,”* one participant regrets.

The participants point out that it would be important to ask the young people themselves *“what is required for integration, so that resources and money wouldn’t be wasted on something that is of no use. Many become marginalised, for example, in Helsinki young people form gangs; could you ask them what happened and what they think could’ve been done to stop the path to crime?”* According to both parents and professionals working with young people, *“the youth can be supported by motivating them, telling them about opportunities, building their self-confidence and encouraging them to appreciate what they are, instead of what other people think of them”*. It is important to remember that *“all people are individuals, including the young, so young people with an immigrant background should also be treated as individuals”*. That is why some people find it *“striking that the potential of black Finnish youth as the builders of the Finnish future is not recognised, because that is what they are”*. Finland needs *“a much greater change in attitude to utilise the skills and abilities of the immigrant youth”*.

6.3 Multilingualism and multiculturalism

“I feel safer in a diverse and multicultural society.”

The participants agree that Finland has become a more diverse and multicultural society year by year, and in particular *“the younger generations seem to be more open”*. We can speak many languages, and *“culture and understanding have increased”*.

However, many people still feel that *“Finland is living in a bubble of monolingualism”* and people do not always understand how important their native language is to immigrant families. One of the participants says that *“I’m constantly fighting between the Finnish language and practicing my native language. It’s important to learn Finnish, but speaking my own native language is so wonderful.”* Some participants worry that in the future world *“English will take up a lot of space, can bypass the native language. Children watch videos in English, and their knowledge of their own language is delayed. You don’t speak your parents’ native language and your parents don’t speak English, there’s a language conflict.”* Therefore, *“it’s important to speak your native language at home”*, and books in the native language can be taken to the kindergarten, for example. *“At the kindergarten, you can see how even though the children don’t speak their parents’ native language, they’ll calm down when you sing songs in that language,”* says one of the participants.

“There’ll be no multilingualism if we don’t provide space and support for the maintenance of your native language and culture,” the participants note. For this, different spaces are required: both concrete and symbolic. These may include, for example, fairy tale and singing sessions in different languages, book presentations and workshops, theatre and plays, language cafés and language courses, as well as events based on different cultural holidays. One participant says that *“I’ve seen a Sámi event, a Roma event and an Estonian event at the library. I’m very fond of such events, and I believe that they will contribute to good relations among the population.”*

“It’s good to have events that introduce different cultures at the library, and events to meet different people,” says one of the participants. Library services should be marketed especially to immigrants, but it is not enough to *“put up advertisements or leaflets and think that now the information has been received”*, because *“cultures can be ones of meetings or oral cultures where people should be approached in a different way”*. One participant advises that *“marketing should be done through key people in the right groups if you want to reach specific communities”*.

It has been noted in municipalities and cities that *“although immigration is growing steadily, it has been seen that cultural services and their content are not becoming as receptive as quickly as one would wish”*. The participants argue that *“it would be important*

to include the cultures of the world". Multiculturalism is seen to be better realised in the restaurant world, for example. On the other hand, multiculturalism *"is easily understood as an external characteristic, even though culture comes from within, and all people have many cultures"*.

One's own cultural heritage can also feel like a burden. *"I find it difficult to carry my cultural heritage. When it comes to Egypt, people often think of the pyramids, but I have nothing to do with them. No one in my homeland would ask me about the pyramids,"* says one of the participants. Another says, *"If anyone knew about my Palestinian roots, I'd have to answer political questions. The other person has to realise that I'm a normal person and I don't have to answer these questions, they don't represent me."* At present, Russian-speaking people, in particular, *"are treated with suspicion and fear"*, and *"bunkers are growing between Russians and others"*. One of the Russian-speaking participants encountered *"harassment on the train on the way here"*.

Participants who have grown up surrounded by many cultures question the experience of a national identity: *"I don't really understand the value of a national identity, or anything to do with pride over the fact that you were born somewhere."* One of the participants describes: *"For me, it's more important to maintain some kind of integrity in the world or an attitude towards the world within me, to maintain multiculturalism within me. I'll find a place where I feel good. Where I can fulfil myself, and it's important that I'm not looking for a country, language, culture or history, but the right people with whom I could, like, feel good."* Another says, *"I feel safer in a diverse and multicultural society."*

6.4 Representation matters

"People can act as bridges to dreams and opportunities simply by existing."

The participants believe that seeing diverse people in culture, in the media, as authorities and as decision-makers is important. The child of one of the participants wondered, *"When I watch TV, there are no children who look like me, when will they come?"* People who work in the performing arts ask: *"Who do young people see on stage? Is there anyone they can identify with?"* The authorities and the central government also look very white as seen both from the inside and from the outside: *"When I look at the central government, we're all typically Finnish here."* This can have an impact on the building of social trust: *"If you come from a country where you can't trust the government, it's hard to achieve trust if there's no one in the institution you can identify with."*

Many immigrants do not even assume that institutions such as museums would represent their identities: *“So many immigrants in Finland, but so little of their lives can be seen in museums.”* Both contemporary art and classics seem very white, and therefore *“they don’t speak to me”*. However, the experience of inclusion can arise in a situation where *“you see stories of people who resemble you”* or, more broadly, *“when I see people and cultures being noticed, it makes me feel good”*. One example of this is *“museums putting out bold messages to support same-sex marriage, it mattered and it was inclusive”*.

“People can act as bridges to dreams and opportunities simply by existing when they are a visible part of the staff somewhere,” describes one of the participants. Therefore, it is considered important that children and young people in particular, but also adults, see people who look like themselves in different fields of society, which will encourage them to participate as well: *“The impact is highly visible in how it affects their lives and gives them a sense of community, of inclusion.”* This also applies to politics and social influence, where immigrants are under-represented: *“Immigrants must be involved in the making of plans and decisions that affect them”*.

7 Experiences of the immigration debate

In addition to immigration, integration, employment and raising the next generation, the Immigration Dialogues shared experiences of the immigration debate in Finland and participation in it. Many participants wished that the debate on immigration would not handle just the extremes and that the voices and experiences of immigrants would be heard more. The opportunity to participate in the dialogue, i.e. constructive discussion on immigration, was an important and empowering experience for many.

7.1 Challenges and opportunities of constructive discussion

“It’s really hard to talk about immigration.”

In one dialogue, it was stated that *“Finland is lagging so much behind in the debate on immigration and racism. Compared to other countries, Finland is 20 to 30 years behind.”* Many feel that the public debate on immigration that focuses on asylum seekers is distorting the overall picture of immigration: *“The debate in recent years has been quite different from what the statistics show, that the majority of immigrants are looking for work and the number of refugees is only about five percent. It seems to me that the debate is focused on a very small part.”*

We should talk more about immigration, but at the same time, many of the participants feel that *“it’s really hard to talk about immigration”* and *“talking about immigration is avoided”*. Difficulties related to discussion were emphasised by both those who have moved to the country and those born in Finland. *“I don’t want to talk about it, even though I’m interested in the subject matter. Despite my education, I don’t actively start discussions or follow them. I feel that it’s an important topic, but I don’t want to get into it,”* says one of the participants. Another says that they have excluded from their life *“certain discussion platforms where I don’t want to be, even though I maybe should be because of my job”*. Many of the participants start to feel bad on social media platforms, and *“it requires a tough skin to be involved”*. Even the participants themselves sometimes get overly excited: *“If the situation immediately turns so that you’re forced to take a defensive or offensive position, my character changes when discussing this topic.”*

The escalation of the debate prompts one to consider: *“Whose voice are we hearing? The ones that shout the loudest? What is the actual opinion of the general public?”* One participant says: *“I haven’t seen immigrants having an immigration debate in public, which would be good.”* Another would like *“to hear more from the immigrants themselves”* and for the debate to *“address the diverse experiences of immigrants”*. It *“would be particularly important to make women’s voices heard in the debate. There are fragile people who should be involved.”* The participants wish that the immigration debate were *“multi-voiced and respectful of human dignity. Based on not being afraid of difficult conversations. So that everyone had a possibility to participate.”*

Some of the participants feel that the discussion on immigration-related issues always gets bogged down by pointless arguments: *“I think that’s the only discussion that exists on the subject (...) of whether or not you’re allowed to come.”* Instead, *“we should talk more about how we welcome the people who are already here, not whether we should allow them to come”*. The discussion lacks voices when *“the attitude is that of either hugging them or seeing them as a threat, and there is nothing in between or any discussion”*.

The participants also consider that the risks and problems of immigration need to be discussed: *“Let’s just say aloud that there’s a problem.”* The Finnish-born participants hope that *“you’d be able to talk about the problems without being labelled a racist”*. However, *“giving a simple answer to the complex issue is not okay”*. Talking about problems such as gangs and insecurity may *“give the populists more to talk about, and arguments on facts won’t help then”*. Also, *“hate speech must be distinguished from the critical debate, because it’s a different matter altogether”*.

In some of the discussions, the participants born in Finland describe how their own perception of immigration has changed over the years: *“I’m not as idealistic as I was 20 years ago.”* It may be that over the years, *“the whole subject matter has become more problematic”*. Some participants were concerned that it was difficult to find positive examples of large-scale immigration globally. One of the participants says that *“five years ago, I was like come here, all of you, and it’s really great, but it seems that my attitude has become more critical over the years, that it’s not how the world works”*. Discussion is required, for example, on *“what kind of population groups, at which size, can live together”* or on why *“some people don’t even want to get hold of a job or the language or their place in society”* and *“start living off of the welfare society”*.

Many participants feel that *“you need to be really careful when talking about immigration”*. *“Representatives of minorities know which terms can be used and what may seem exclusive”*, but others may be afraid of *“using terms that are no longer acceptable”*. One participant thinks: *“I’d be really careful when going into a conversation, I’d be slapped with the racist card, I’d say the wrong thing, I’d be all rigid”*. On the other hand, *“you shouldn’t*

take it personally if someone corrects you and says that a specific term should no longer be used". You are talking about a different matter altogether if you "don't want to learn or understand or accept that someone can feel in another way".

Racism is one of the most difficult topics of conversation. According to one of the participants: *"Everyone is a racist at heart. You should be able to talk about racism openly and constructively. It exists, it can't be swept under the rug, and it must be brought up in conversation."* The participants admit that *"admitting and recognising racism is difficult and requires a lot of work, a painful process, and not easy at all"*. However, it is necessary for racism, prejudice and hate speech to be *"systematically addressed at all levels of society"*. This is the wish of both the immigrants and those born in Finland.

7.2 Encounters and understanding in dialogue

"Understanding and solutions come from encounters."

For some of the participants, an invitation to the dialogue meant that the government was genuinely interested in and open to the experiences and wellbeing of immigrants: *"The dialogue was a valuable and very necessary opportunity for immigrants to express their concerns and frustrations, and the hidden problems in Finland"*. It is the wish of both the participants and the organisers that *"the voice that emerged from the discussions could be heard from afar"*, and that *"the authorities would effectively address the issues raised in the Immigration Dialogues"*. Participation in the Immigration Dialogues gave a voice to many individuals and groups who do not usually feel that they are being heard. The participants hope that such empowerment continues to be part of the development of the civil society: *"We'll be able to participate in the building of society"*, as *"we can all play our part in improving the situation and the future"*.

"The thing is, we don't trust each other because we don't know each other," one of the participants describes the prejudice arising from diversity. Therefore, *"we must look for new ways to get rid of prejudice. We need more opportunities to listen and to talk to people with an immigrant background."* Many of the participants therefore wish more opportunities to participate and invite more people to similar discussions. Understanding will improve through listening and the sharing of experiences because *"there's always the idea and the risk that your own views may change during a discussion"*.

"Understanding and solutions come from encounters," the participants note. Encounters between different people generate curiosity about different life stories, build trust in the goodwill of others and help brainstorm solutions to resolve difficult situations. Encounters

are also required between immigrants in different situations, professionals working with them and immigration authorities because *“immigration is about people, and immigration issues cannot be resolved on paper alone”*.

8 Conclusions from the Immigration Dialogues

“We agree that Finland needs immigration. However, there’s still much to be done to ensure that these people are part of our society.”

The Immigration Dialogues broadened the overall picture of immigration and increased understanding of immigration-related issues within and between groups of people. The Dialogue materials on the experiences of nearly 700 people, both those who have immigrated to Finland and those who were born in Finland, are unique in terms of both their scope and depth. Next, we present our conclusions based on this extensive experience-based body of materials on what will promote the receptiveness of Finnish society and the integration and inclusion of immigrants. The conclusions are based on the content of the Immigration Dialogues, but in the solutions we present, we also take a step forward based on our professional experience on the development of various public services.

1. **Flexible integration services**

Immigration is more diverse than its public image. The immigration debate focuses on asylum seekers and humanitarian immigration, even though the majority of immigration is work-related. The Immigration Dialogues make visible how people move to Finland for many reasons and in many different life situations. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that one model of integration is suitable for all. Immigrants want to be involved in the development of the integration services in various roles, such as experts by experience, co-developers and professionals. A wide-ranging reform of integration processes should therefore be initiated in Finland, involving immigrants from different backgrounds at all stages of planning and testing.

2. **Easily accessible information and advice**

Immigrants require clear and easily accessible information on the permit procedures, dealing with public authorities, public services, the labour market and terms of employment, the local culture, housing and everyday matters. The system could be based on, for instance, the One-Stop Guidance Center (Ohjaamo) system that offers guidance for people under the age of 30. Based on the model, a service entity could be built through which immigrants would easily receive guidance and advice in matters ranging from everyday life to dealing with the authorities.

3. **Inviting people to communities**

Everybody wants to belong to social networks and communities that are of relevance to them, which is why it is important to invite immigrants to join such communities. In Finland, it would be important to find out which communities in different localities could naturally invite different people who have moved to the country. These communities could be from the public, private or third sector. Targeted support should be provided to the communities to develop and boost their capacity to reach and invite immigrants.

4. **Lowering the employment threshold**

Finnish language skills are a significant barrier to employment. For studying Finnish, immigrants need more flexible models that take into account different life situations, including the development of the language skills of those in working life.

Another significant threshold for employment is the insufficient recognition of skills and qualifications. Work on clearer competence recognition practices and flexible lifelong learning pathways must be continued. New labour policies should be created in Finland to provide employers with the opportunity to offer different types of work practice programs, language learning opportunities and internship models to immigrants. Models to enable immigrants to convert their qualifications and previous work experience into a format that works in Finnish working life could be simultaneously created.

5. **Bringing the richness of multiculturalism to the heart of the communication**

In discussions on society, working life and the Finnish economy, immigrants are referred to as resources and a labour force to resolve the labour shortage in the ageing country. This is instrumentalisation of individuals. We need to talk more about the opportunities for immigrants to build a home, a good life and a future for themselves and their families here. Multilingualism and diverse cultural activities in which people from different backgrounds can participate to feel themselves heard and seen are part of this process. Immigrants must also be offered a better opportunity to experience joy and pride in their own ethnic background, country of birth and culture. One way to promote this could be increasing Finland's contribution to the UN International Migrants Day (18 December) to make the day a broadly visible opportunity to celebrate the enrichment those who have moved to the country offer to Finnish society.

6. **Continuing the constructive and multifaceted debate on immigration**

Participation in the immigration debate is a daunting idea for many. The participants of the Immigration Dialogues hope that the immigration debate of the future will include as many different voices and experiences as possible, and that both immigrants and those born in Finland, from experts by experience to the authorities, can participate. The dialogue that creates understanding must be continued, as a better understanding of the experiences of people who have come to the country in different situations and, on the other hand, of the experiences of those who were born in Finland, is an essential prerequisite for building effective legislation, services, communities and daily life. It would make sense to continue the Immigration Dialogues with new thematic dialogues at the national level, which could openly and boldly address the benefits of immigration and the challenges and problems it poses. For example, there should be more discussion about racism because in light of the discussions at hand, it seems that the manifestation of racism in different areas of society is not recognised to a sufficient extent and we do not yet have sufficient means to tackle it.

AUTHORS

The authors of the publication, **Elina Henttonen**, D.Sc. (Econ.) of Valtaamo Oy and **Kai Alhanen**, Th.D., MA of Aretai Oy/DialogueAcademy, are experienced researchers and experts in dialogue with diverse experience in qualitative analysis and the facilitation of dialogue, the utilisation of dialogue experience, training in dialogue expertise and the development of dialogue methods in Finland and internationally.



Ministry of the Interior
Finland

Ministry of the Interior PO Box 26, FI-00023 Government

www.intermin.fi