



Sisu and Borderlands

**Autumn 2025 National Dialogues
Summary report**

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**KANSALLISET
DIALOGIT**



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Summary

This report examines the concept of “sisu” and its multiple meanings in modern Finland. Sisu is a concept associated with Finnish culture that has no exact equivalent in other languages. However, it is often equated with the concept of resilience, which is a scientific concept used in psychology to explain a person’s ability to cope in challenging situations, to reorient themselves and to ‘bounce back’.¹

The report is based on the National Dialogues conducted in autumn 2025. The report utilises two sets of data: dialogues on the theme of sisu and dialogues on the borderlands. The latter focused more on security but also touched on themes related to sisu. There were a total of 82 dialogues on sisu and 39 dialogues on the borderlands.

Sisu has traditionally been seen as a Finnish national treasure that has helped the nation survive historical crises, such as wars and the challenges of reconstruction. It has been described as an inner and spiritual force, a state of mind that springs from a person’s ‘inner self’ and enables tenacious perseverance even in the most difficult circumstances. However, we are living in a time when the traditional image of the lonely, gritty sisu hero is being challenged and is in transition.

¹ Poijula, S. (2018). Resilience. The skill of coping with change. Helsinki: Kirjapaja.

The report highlights how the concept of sisu has expanded to include softer dimensions such as resilience, flexibility and self-compassion. Modern sisu is not just blind perseverance, but the wisdom to recognise one's own limits and the courage to ask for help when one's own resources are exhausted. This new, communal sisu emphasises the idea that we are stronger together. At its best, sisu is a shared experience that is strengthened through interaction and peer support.

The report also discusses where sisu is needed in this day and age. The discussions highlight the daily struggle for survival in a crumbling welfare state, where those in a particularly vulnerable position are forced to use their sisu to demand statutory services and their basic rights. At the same time, global challenges such as climate change, economic uncertainty and changes in the security environment – especially on the eastern border – create a constant need for mental resilience and maintaining hope.

The discussions also considered whether sisu is a universal human trait or a specifically Finnish characteristic. The experiences of immigrants enrich the discussion by showing that perseverance is needed everywhere and that sisu can serve as a unifying factor for all residents of Finland, as long as the associated images are updated to reflect the present day. The report offers a multifaceted picture of sisu of the present day. Sisu not only helps us to cope but could also act as a force for change on the path towards a more sustainable and empathetic society.

National dialogues

National dialogues have two key objectives:

1. To provide citizens with opportunities to come together and discuss important issues in a constructive and open manner.

2. To use the experiences of participants to create an understanding and up-to-date picture of various social phenomena, challenges, and opportunities that will benefit public administration and other actors.

In addition, National dialogues aim to strengthen social trust, participation, and the ability of different actors to address issues through dialogue. National dialogues are based on equal, open and transparent cooperation between public administration and civil society. The activities are guided by a core group, which is responsible for coordinating the discussion series, producing the material provided to the dialogue organisers, inviting and briefing the organisers, and producing and publishing a report summarising the dialogues. Discussion organisers are provided with training and support materials for organising and facilitating discussions.

Any organisation or citizen can get involved in organising National Dialogues. The aim is to ensure that the voices of as many different groups of people as possible are heard, including those groups that are not otherwise heard in social debate.

Dialogue as a form of discussion means equal discussion based on the experiences of the participants. Dialogue aims to increase understanding of the topic of discussion, others and oneself. Dialogue often has a flexible structure, in which tuning in and open discussion are used to deepen understanding together. The discussion does not seek consensus or solutions. Dialogue allows room for different perspectives and even surprising insights.

1. Introduction

Finnish society is being tested in new ways. Russia's military actions and other global challenges are undermining people's sense of security both near the Russian border and throughout Finland. Currently, we need new ways to cope and to strengthen security and solidarity. Could National unity be of help?

The traditional Finnish image of *sisu* is strongly linked to self-reliance and perseverance. The image of Jussi with a hoe in a swamp, from a famous Finnish novel by Väinö Linna, easily comes to mind for Finns, as does survival in the Winter War. However, current social changes require a redefinition of the concept. Based on National dialogues, this report examines what *sisu* looks like in 2025: will it still be merely stubborn perseverance, or can a softer and more communal meaning be found for it? It also examines what life looks like from the perspective of those living close to the Russian border, what concerns them, where they need *sisu* and what brings them security.

A key observation is the expansion of the concept of *sisu* from traditional perseverance towards resilience, flexibility and self-compassion. Modern *sisu* is not just an individual's ability to endure stress but also includes the wisdom to recognise one's own limits and the courage to ask for help. Of particular significance is communal *sisu*, which is based on interaction

and peer support; it is seen as a resource in which the resilience of the community exceeds the resources of individual members.

The report analyses the need for *sisu* in modern Finland, where challenges include the weakening of the welfare state's service structures and a changed security environment. The review considers whether citizens are forced to use their *sisu* unreasonably in order to obtain basic services provided by law. At the same time, it recognises the role of *sisu* in maintaining the ability to function and faith in the future amid uncertainty.

Finally, *sisu* is seen as a universal human capacity in a diversifying society, which can bring together people from different backgrounds and act as a force for social change. The aim is to offer decision-makers and citizens perspectives on how this National resource can be strengthened in a sustainable way to meet future challenges. The report challenges us to consider whether *sisu* is a burden that justifies isolation or possibly a shared, renewable natural resource – an enabler of hope and change.

2. Information about the discussions

121 sisu **82**
borderland **39**

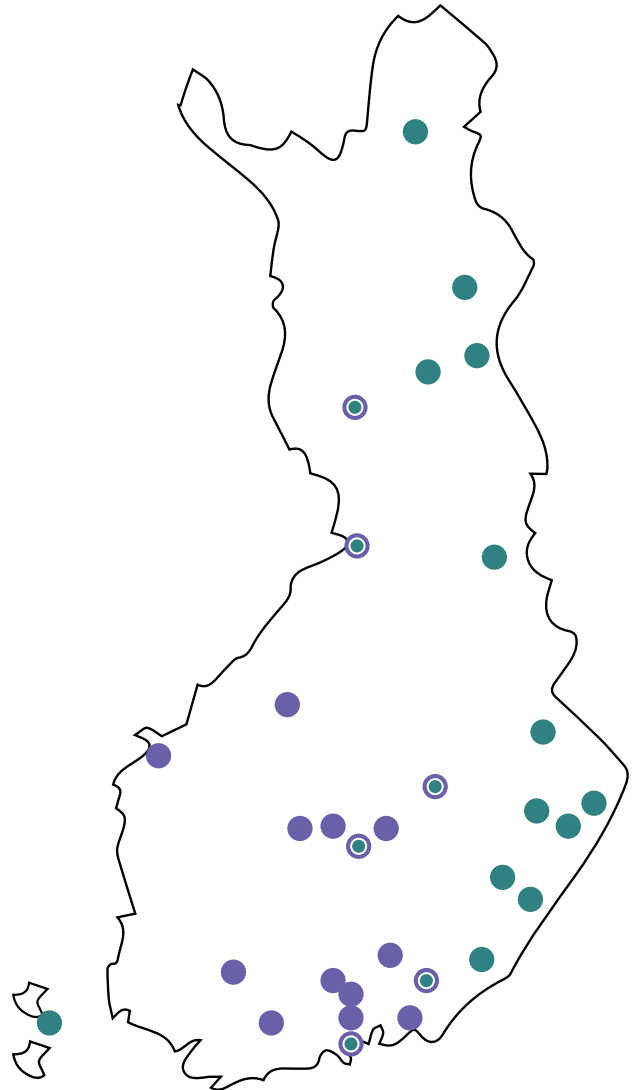
discussions

1,170

participants

Age of participants:

4–89



Four languages were used in the discussions: Finnish, Swedish, English, Russian

Locations

Sisu-dialogues: Forssa, Hankasalmi, Helsinki, Hyvinkää, Jyväskylä, Järvenpää, Keuruu, Kouvola, Kuohu, Kuopio, Lahti, Lestijärvi, Lohja, Loviisa, Oulu, Rovaniemi, Tuusula, Vaasa

Border region dialogues: Åland, Helsinki, Ilomantsi, Inari, Joensuu, Jyväskylä, Kemijärvi, Kouvola, Kovero, Kuopio, Lappeenranta, Lieksa, Oulu, Punkaharju, Rovaniemi, Salla, Savonlinna, Savukoski, Suomussalmi

The participants included:

Daycare children, primary school pupils, secondary school pupils, upper secondary school pupils, polytechnic and university students, elderly people and pensioners, representatives of the veteran generation, ministry officials, university interns, municipal managers and decision-makers, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers from various countries, such as Somalia, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, China, Bangladesh and Congo, organisation representatives, volunteers, village activists and youth council members, experts by experience, such as homeless people, education and training experts, experts by experience in learning difficulties, disabled artists, visually impaired people and people with rare diseases, journalists, agricultural entrepreneurs, police officers, doctors, psychologists, priests, museum professionals, teachers, dancers, fathers from divorced families, family carers, unemployed job seekers, freelance artists, self-employed researchers, people on sick leave, Sámi people, Afro-Finns and members of sexual minorities, holiday home owners, volunteers and residents of archipelago and border regions.

The discussions were organised by

Municipalities, welfare areas, parishes and central government

Open Democracy Network, Central Finland Welfare Region, City of Forssa, Hankasalmi Youth Council, Inari Parish, Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Finance, City of Jyväskylä, Parish of Jyväskylä, Keuruu City Library, City of Kuopio, City of Loviisa, Municipality of Tuusula, Vaala Library, Ostrobothnia Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, Parish of Vaara-Karjala, Municipality of Salla, Municipality of Savukoski, Municipality of Suomussalmi.

Companies and private individuals

Inka Koutaniemi, Outi Kinnunen, Odeo Design, Kohtaava dialogi, Green Sisu, Startverkstaden Seglet, Jakobstad, Mikael Järvenkylä, Lea Lihavainen, Celeste Richman, Sami Tanskanen.

Foundations, institutes, and educational organisations

Timeout Foundation, Kansanvalistusseura sr., University of Eastern Finland, Rural Education Association, Sámi Education Centre, East Karelia Folk High School, Joensuu Region Adult Education Centre, Sivi Study Centre, Savonia University of Applied Sciences, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Rovala College, Lapland University of Applied Sciences.

Civil society organisations and associations

Nuorten Suomi ry (Youth Finland Association), Ylä-Muuratjärvi seura ry (Ylä-Muuratjärvi Association), Kuohun kyläyhdistys ry (Kuohu Village Association), Pohjanmaan alueellinen kansalaisjärjestöakatemia (Ostrobothnia Regional Civil Society Academy), Vanhusneuvostopäivä (Senior Citizens' Council Day), Isät Lasten Asialla Ry (Fathers for Children Association), Vanhus- ja lähimmäispalvelun liitto VALLI ry (Association for Services for the Elderly and Neighbours), Vammaisfoorumi ry (Disability Forum), Kynnys ry (Threshold Association), Association for Diverse Learners, Finland-Russia Society, Rare Diseases Network, MIELI Finnish Mental Health Association, Finnish White Ribbon Association, Helsinki White Ribbon Association, D-asema Kallio, D-asema Kannelmäki, Green Sisu, Central Association of Pensioners EKL ry, EHJÄ ry, Jakobstad Peer Support Group, Operation Libero Finland ry, Finnish Settlement Association ry, MIELI, Rovaniemi Region Mental Health Association, Rovaniemi Life Cycle Network/Life Cycle Network for Children, Young People and Families, NEPPARI project and Erityislasten Omaiset

ELO ry, Pohjanmaa Regional Civil Society Academy, Toivo Teoiksi 2025 community, Kansalaisareena ry, Ehjä ry, Kuule minua project, Rovalan Settlementti ry, Finnish Red Cross Åland District, Save the Children in Åland, Åland Provincial Government, Nätverket Bärkraft, Folkhälsan in Åland, Mariehamn Youth Unit, Kymenlaakson Kylät ry and Etelä-Karjalan Kylät ry, Tammenlehvän Perinneliitto, Ilomantsin Marttayhdistys ry, Nuorten Suomi ry, Joensuun Marttayhdistys ry, Joensuun seudun karjalaisseuroja, Keski-Suomen Sydänpiiri ry, Kemijärven Järjestökiehininen ry, Arktiset maahanmuuttajat AMA ry, Suomen Operaatio ry, Koveron Nuorisoseura ry, Joensuun seudun Leader-yhdistys ry, South Karelia District Association of the Karelian Union, Lieksa Brass Week Support Association, Tammenlehvän Perinneliitto North Ostrobothnia Regional Association, SPR Lapland District, Joensuu Region Family Caregivers, Kalevalaiset Naiset/Joensuu, Linnala College. Finnish DKG Association/ Epsilon Division, Climate Change Literature Reading Circle, Leader Northern Lapland Association.

Specific topics discussed and experiences from the dialogues

In addition to summarising the dialogues, the organisers were asked to report whether they had specified the topic with any particular emphasis. They were also asked to briefly describe how the organisers and participants had experienced the dialogues.

In the Sisu dialogues, sisu was examined from the perspectives of different population groups. The discussions emphasised the importance of sisu in social preparation and decision-making. Sisu was also analysed from the perspective of specific groups, such as young people, immigrants, people with disabilities, people with rare diseases and the homeless. These discussions emphasised coping with everyday life and the manifestation of sisu as physical, mental and emotional strength. In addition, the topic was reflected in future challenges, such as the demands of a technological society and sustainability, while considering the balance between sisu and rest.

The topics discussed in the Borderlands dialogues focused broadly on security, community spirit, and life in border regions. The topics included NATO membership, preparedness, the actions of the authorities, and what creates or undermines security for individuals. Many discussions emphasised solidarity and resilience from the perspective of different population groups, such as young people, the elderly, veterans, and immigrants. In addition, local and cultural characteristics were examined,

such as land use in the Sámi region, the experiences of Karelian actors, and the role of various associations, such as the Martha Association and heart communities, in strengthening everyday security. The Martha Association is a Finnish non-profit organization well-known for its dedication to educating the public in matters of home economics. Multiculturalism, the vitality of border regions, and the importance of language cafés in community building were also discussed.

The organisers found the discussions to be mostly easy, rewarding, and warm-hearted. Clear instructions, ready-made script templates, and a functional dialogue method helped the organisers. Although the demanding nature and novelty of the topic may have initially made both the facilitators and participants uneasy, the discussions themselves proved to be meaningful and insightful. They offered participants a valuable experience of being heard and engaging in joint reflection. The most significant challenge was recruiting participants, as busy schedules and the perceived difficulty of the topic made the invitation process laborious and made it particularly difficult to reach young people or "ordinary people". However, the motivation and enthusiasm of the participants helped the discussions to flow smoothly after the initial warm-up.

Analysis and reporting of the material

The data consisted of two parts: Sisu and Borderlands. The texts, consisting of anonymised transcripts provided by the dialogue organisers, were analysed using qualitative content analysis². There were two analysts. The thematic framework was created in a joint dialogue after both analysts had familiarised themselves with a sufficient amount of the material. After that, one analyst classified ¼ of the material and the other ¾ of the material.

The Sisu material has been classified based on the following questions: What does Sisu mean? Why do we need Sisu at this time? How can we strengthen Sisu? The Borderlands material was classified based on the following questions: What does the border and living on the border mean? What challenges the sense of security? What brings a sense of security? How do we talk about sisu? The report is structured based on these questions.

Finally, the classification obtained was

compared with the classification of the closed artificial intelligence programme Notebook LM. This was done to ensure the comprehensiveness and multi-perspectivity of the analysis. The AI classification confirmed the analysts' results. AI was used in writing the report, for example, to find relevant text quotations.

There are many direct quotations from the discussions to give the reader an idea of the diversity of the material. A single theme is often illustrated with several quotations from different discussions. If a quotation contains several comments from the same discussion, the discussants and their comments are separated by letters. The grammar of the quotations has been edited as little as possible, only when necessary to clarify the meaning or improve the readability of the discussion.

² Sarajärvi, A., & Tuomi, J. (2017). *Qualitative research and content analysis: Revised edition*. Tammi.

3. What is sisu?

Tenacious perseverance

Almost all participants agreed that sisu means tenacious and persistent perseverance. Many describe sisu as an inner and spiritual strength, a state of mind that can be found in every person when needed. The word sisu is derived from the word 'sisä' or 'sisus', meaning 'inside' or 'inner self'. It refers specifically to a person's insides, their chest or heart, the place where emotions and vitality are thought to reside.³ In the discussion a sisu attitude was described as follows:

"Yes, I can do it, I know how, I can manage, I am capable."

"Sisu is an inner strength that can be found in every person. Some people fight for their lives, others for their finances, school or workplace. All this requires sisu and perseverance, strength and willpower. That is sisu. Sisu is also the decision to be able to do anything, to surpass oneself and, above all, to help others, because we all need each other here, no one can cope with life alone, and it takes sisu to admit that. Sisu is perseverance in all situations in life. Determination, strength, willpower, fighting through everything unpleasant and difficult."

"Grit your teeth and get through it, the Kummeli mentality (referring to a popular comedy TV show)."

With sisu, you can achieve your goals, see things through to the end, and keep going even when you feel like you're running out of strength or the task doesn't feel comfortable. Sisu helps you endure adversity and uncertainty. A person with sisu does not get discouraged by small setbacks but continues to try different methods and persists for a long time. Sisu comes into play when all other means have been exhausted. It is an effort of will in a difficult situation. In such cases, it is hope for something better or for success that keeps you going. This definition is close to the concept of volition used in psychology.⁴ Volition refers to a person's ability to put their plans into practice, especially when the action requires effort.



³ Häkkinen, K. (2004): Etymological dictionary of modern Finnish. WSOY.

⁴ Parppe, R. (2008). Business coaching as a self-regulation development intervention. Helsinki University of Technology. Doctoral dissertation.

One participant in the discussion thought that 'sisu is an optimistic word because it aims for the good'. The opposite of sisu is discouragement.

"Sisu is also the ability to keep going even when everything seems to be going wrong. It is a strength that usually emerges when all other means have been exhausted."

Action may be triggered by sisu', a strong feeling of anger or frustration. It is often a matter that is important to oneself or a loved one, and that one wants to change. Parents of children with special needs, people with disabilities and their families, organisations for the elderly and their loved ones, for example, spoke of sisu on behalf of others.

"In recent years, I have found a surprising amount of sisu in myself when I have had to focus my energy on fighting for someone else. I spent years caring for my own parents. This often meant putting my everyday life aside and putting on my sisu armour."

"Finland is an Evangelical Lutheran country: we have been taught not to complain, to be humble and content with what we have. Do not think that you are better than others. Sometimes you need to show a little grit. You do not always have to be content. Perhaps your grit will grow if you dare to say that not everything is OK. You have to dare to be grumpy sometimes."

Bravely towards the unknown

Sisu also means daring to face new challenges. These may include a new job or place of study, a new life situation, such as moving away from home, moving to a new town or country, or starting a new life after divorce or bereavement. These situations can be associated with uncertainty or fear. Sisu is the courage to face many kinds of difficult emotions or to take steps towards a frightening situation. Many people encounter such situations in their everyday lives. Sometimes the attitude can even be reckless, which raises the question of whether it is still a matter of courage.

"I pondered different words to find the one that best describes it. I came to the conclusion that for me it means courage."

"Sisu requires courage. Courage from someone in a vulnerable position, courage from an employee to help and, if necessary, smooth things over."

"Courage to get involved in different situations. My friend had social anxiety and dared to go sing karaoke. He surpassed himself. And then it was like, YAY, I surpassed myself! It took grit."

"If you have too much sisu, you can do something reckless."



According to some discussions, sisu is the ability to see alternatives or come up with new ways of doing things in challenging situations and to dare to make bold choices. Sisu can be seen as an enabler of change. Sisu can also be seen in the ability to question your own thoughts and goals or actively refuse to do something you do not want to do.

“Creativity is part of sisu.”

“Sometimes I feel that too much emphasis is placed on it being merely perseverance. Sisu can perhaps be said to be a force for change and an enabler, and as such it appears to me that it has enabled, for example, social mobility in Finland. It has also enabled the production and consumption of culture. I feel a strong need to emphasise sisu as an enabler.”

“For me, in recent years, sisu has also come to mean daring to question my own thoughts and goals.”

“Sometimes active sisu is about refusing something: an active decision not to go along with something.”

Through the grey stone – the lonely hero of sisu

When talking about Finnish sisu, an image from Väinö Linna’s book “Täällä Pohjan tähden alla” (Under the North Star) comes to mind, in which Jussi, the main character, clears a swamp into a field all by himself. This kind of solitary stubbornness is referred to in several dialogues. Finns go “with gritted teeth” “even through grey stone”. According to the discussants, the harsh natural conditions of the north have also contributed to the development of Finnish sisu. Eero Järnefelt’s painting Under the Yoke (Burning the Brushwood), depicting slash-and-burn farming, illustrates this bleakness. In addition, the miracle of the Winter War and the post-war reconstruction have demanded, and at the same time strengthened, the Finns’ sisu.

“Sisu is about going beyond your comfort zone, damn it. During the post-war reconstruction phase, sisu was needed to build houses and a future with gritted teeth.”

“When someone says “sisu,” I see someone in grey clothes in the cold weather on a field. A grey image that it’s tough, but it doesn’t matter, let’s get through it with sisu.”

Many dialogues refer to negative or 'bad' sisu (being ill-tempered). These refer to the older meaning of sisu. According to the dictionary of Finnish dialects, in Old Finnish, sisu could mean fierceness, bitterness or malice. The positive meaning of sisu, describing perseverance and tenacity, began to establish itself during the National romanticism of the 19th century. In the 20th century, especially after the war, sisu was associated with sacrifice and endurance.⁵

However, questioning this National imagery and meanings emerges as an important message in the material. Stubbornly trying to do everything alone can lead to exhaustion and loneliness. It can be a trap from which there is no escape. This kind of sisu is not seen solely as a heroic trait to be aspired to. This way of thinking is reflected in the following quotes:

"Is it rather a kind of inflexibility?"

"Too much determination is not good: I held on to my marriage for too long because my determination would not let me give up."

"And I recognise the same negativity in sisu as NN, even though there are situations where no one needs to push forward with sisu, but in the Finnish way, you have to do it because you are Finnish."

The concept of sisu can also be used as a weapon. Sometimes people are required to have the sisu to cope on their own, even if they do not have the resources to do so. If challenges are dismissed, appealing to sisu can be even more discouraging.

"No matter how much you tell someone to be sisu, it is completely impossible if they have no support. I still believe that, as a rule, people want to take responsibility for their own lives. There are underlying factors that drain people's resources. If you don't have the resources, demanding grit and resilience is like twisting the knife in the wound."

⁵ Helminen, T. (2024). Sisu, its lead and side roles: sisu and sisu discourse in Finland's literature and as part of the discourse of Finnishness. University of Eastern Finland. Doctoral dissertation..



Softer sisu – from sisu to resilience

Sisu is a concept associated with Finnish culture that has no exact equivalent in other languages. However, it is often equated with the concept of resilience, which is a scientific concept used in psychology to explain a person's ability to cope in challenging situations, to reorient themselves and to 'bounce back'. In National dialogue discussions, many would prefer to emphasise flexible endurance, similar to resilience. According to them, the stubbornness and obstinacy of sisu are often unwise.

Sisu could also mean knowing when to give up if a task seems impossible to accomplish. In such cases, people should be able to assess their own resources and scale their actions accordingly. Sometimes you need to rest and gather your strength to adapt to new situations or recover from your efforts. A more forgiving attitude is that you don't have to have sisu every single day.

"Is it strong to dare to be vulnerable? In African culture, people are open about difficult things and are sensitive to the problems of others."

"Can gentleness coexist with sisu?"

"Our union members were sometimes advised that they also need to know when to give in and raise their hands, saying, 'I can't do this anymore, you take the lead'."

"It is true that resilience can also be seen as resilience, and resilience means knowing when your resources or capacity are full. In a way, you could also think of resilience as recognising your own limits."

The following quote highlights the generational difference in the concept of sisu:

"I strive for the best and think of sisu through my own parents. For them, sisu has been about moving forward. I myself feel that Elisabeth Lahti is a gentler advocate of sisu. I would not necessarily always divide things into hard and soft or similar categories but rather believe that the best outcome is always a combination of different things. The ability to combine things and different dimensions is important. Sisu is really aggressive pushing forward, when it should also include a human touch."

In working life and management, it might be wiser to show empathy and accept mistakes than to demand extreme performance.

"Wise action is not necessarily pushing forward. It is having a clear vision and being goal-oriented and seeing change as an opportunity. A wise new leader listens and sets the ship sailing in a certain direction, while also showing empathy. I don't see anything good in pushing things through by any means necessary."

“I am impressed, for example, by our president’s decision to reward fathers or, for example, to cheer on athletes who have lost at the Olympics. It is really important to be able to handle things in a way that also supports those who have failed. Leadership should be at this level of practical action.”

Leaving things undone can also be sisu if the result is strengthening one’s own well-being.

“Recognising your own agency in your life choices, agency brings hope Leaving things undone can also be sisu — the decision to choose your own well-being.”

“However, life cannot be about pushing hard all the time. If it is permanent, you will burn out.”

“Sisu is super fuel that burns, and it is also very exhausting. Sure, you can stand on your head for a week if you know it will end. But it cannot be continuous.”

“As an entrepreneur, I worked too hard for 15 years. I just worked and worked and worked, and then I couldn’t do anything anymore. I don’t recommend it to anyone.”

Others wonder whether the warmth and empathy of loved ones could increase sisu and willpower. Could sisu be described in terms of empathy, so that you don’t have to sacrifice your own well-being? Compassion for others and yourself could be a new, softer form of sisu.

One participant thought that more emphasis should be placed on a holistic view of thinking and feeling human beings. Recently, the idea that a person is well when their nervous system is in balance has gained traction. One participant wondered whether the familiar question related to sisu, ‘do you have backbone?’, could be replaced with ‘do you have a nervous system?’.



Collective sisu – 1+1=3

Instead of individual struggle, the discussions suggest doing things together. You don't have to do everything alone. Asking for help is a skill that is part of a new kind of sisu. There is no shame in admitting that you cannot do something alone and asking for help. Offering help to others can also strengthen the resilience of both the person being helped and the helper. Simply standing by someone and listening to their concerns can also help.

"You can practise and set your own limits so that they do not define your life too much. You can rejoice in small successes. Being kind to yourself, even if things don't go perfectly. Showing compassion for yourself is a big part of sisu. Taking breaks and recovering. You don't have to manage everything on your own all the time. It is okay to ask for help. Asking for help is not a weakness."

"The concept of sisu needs updating. "The swamp, hoe and Jussi", The Unknown Soldier (novel and film), militant attitude. Hopefully, that's not all it means today. Nowadays, it means, among other things, that you can ask others for help."

"And perhaps a social change is coming, as in Finland we have thought that we are and will go alone with our own grit, but little by little we are realising that it is not embarrassing to ask for help and admit that at this moment I cannot do it alone but need help."

"You need sisu to survive in this life. But I don't really want it to be that way. It's a driving force for Finns, but how far can you get with grit alone? At some point, you also need to know how to say out loud that you can't cope, and the community will help you. Perhaps after this discussion, I will also think about that. That it's about helping your mate up the stairs and getting out of the mess together when you've gone a bit in the wrong direction. So maybe that kind of grit is also needed in the community."



The discussions also mention sisu as a collective force. When people talk to each other, they find common goals that they want to work towards together. At its best, different people recognise their own and each other's strengths that can help achieve a common goal. By supporting others, sisu also spreads and grows stronger.

"Talking to others can help you find sisu. Sisu is not just a character trait, it is interaction between people."

"Supporting others becomes stronger when sisu spreads."

"When sisu becomes part of a community, it grows stronger and more influential."

"Although sisu is often perceived as an individual trait, it can also be a community strength – the ability to stick together, help others and build a better future together. For example, when you are the underdog (as a football team), you get strength and more strength from your teammates. And when you can no longer do it alone, you need communal sisu, where well-being is shared, and you work together to do good."

"Individuals are determined in their own way, but can a work community be even more determined together, i.e. 1+1=3?"

Perseverance enables the community to succeed. This is what one participant refers to as 'intelligent sisu'. According to them, 'it is easier to achieve things when they are done together from the start'. A few participants ponder how collective sisu can be created in this individualistic society.

"If only communities had that kind of sisu mentality. Even though things turned out this way, there is a feeling that we will get through this as a community and that sisu is the force that will make it possible."

"There are many different life experiences here, so I would like to remind you that sisu is not just an individual trait but a shared experience, a group striving towards a common goal. That, too, is shared sisu."

Community spirit is embodied in voluntary work, which is still delightfully common in smaller communities, as the following conversation illustrates:

"B: Speaking of sisu, there's this village hall, which has been renovated with sisu.

D: We've raised money four times and worked hard to get it. And we've received praise for how well we've taken care of the building.

A: One thing that stuck in my mind was thinking on a larger scale about how widespread this kind of association activity is and how much it depends on people's grit. What we achieve depends a lot on ourselves.

C: The discussion has highlighted the importance of being concrete to move the right things forward and work with people. Perseverance is people centred."

Power to influence society

At its best, community action is channelled into social influence. People notice injustices, such as when a law is not implemented in people's everyday lives. It takes sisu to start figuring out what those people's rights are, what social structures can be used to influence them, or what structures should be changed. Employees of organisations and associations do a lot of this kind of determined advocacy work, even though results are slow to come and there are setbacks ahead. The discussions provide good examples of regional cooperation between organisations and municipal administrations, which has been successful when issues have been pursued with determination.

“Sisu is often used to respond to issues related to a person's extreme limits. For example, human rights, mistreatment, etc. Sisu can be strengthened in a community, where it softens and takes on more effective forms.”

“When similar people are brought together for a common cause, it brings about sisu. Now let's fight!”

People draw strength from their desire to influence the status of groups of people who are important to them, such as children with special needs, people with disabilities, the elderly, immigrants, children and young people, or the unemployed. When it comes to a value or goal that is important to a person, they have the determination to work hard for it.

“In one client group, determination was evident in the clients' desire for integration training. They talked about it so long and so persistently that it finally happened. In the end, eight integration training groups were established in Loviisa. They did not give up until they got what they wanted.”

“One great thing about organisations is that their activities are often based on certain values. In this day and age, determination is needed to ensure that these values remain intact and that the economy does not dictate everything.”

“Sisu must be channelled into good. What good do I want to see in the world? Use your sisu for that, it is a resource.”

“A sense of community ensures that there will be enough sisu in the future. There has to be a reason to have sisu. That reason can be found in close friends or family. Finland must be a country that its citizens feel is worth defending. Then, when the going gets tough, we will be ready to defend it. We want to stick together and defend our country.”

“Sisu is linked to values. If you are convinced or aware that you are on the side of the right values, it gives you the strength to promote them or oppose anyone who tries to undermine them. The same applies to your own boundaries. If you cross your boundaries, you become more determined and may discover a braver side to yourself.”

Generations of sisu

Finnish sisu is strongly associated with the Winter War, a war between the Soviet Union and Finland 1939–1940, where it manifested itself as a tenacious struggle against a superior threat.

“A: I was wondering how sisu has become so... It’s a big part of Finnish culture, so I wonder if it’s mostly because of the Winter War.

B: It probably is... especially if you think about our recent history, it certainly played a major role when the small Finnish nation defeated the great Russia in the harsh conditions of the winter frost. That’s exactly where it came from.”

The Winter War is seen as having united the Finnish people. Some commentators wonder whether there is anything in modern times that could unite Finns, or whether polarisation is inevitable.

“While the war specifically united a nation divided by civil war, we are now becoming polarised again and the country is splitting in two. ‘The government’s great impoverishment’ – the rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. The differences are visible in living standards, and we have a two-class society. It is becoming increasingly difficult for them to understand each other.”

Many of the participants in the discussion think that people used to be more resilient. The generation that lived through the war experienced scarcity and got used to getting by with little.

“People used to be more resilient. They didn’t give up easily.”

“In my opinion, Finns today are not very resilient anymore. At least not in the way that I have been, having had a really difficult life. Yes, when I was younger, having been born in the 1940s, there was no money or anything else in Finland, but I was born in the 1940s. Life was completely different back then, you had to get by with very little.”

“A: My parents had sisu, and there was no sign of any deprivation around us, and that sisu has been passed on to us now.

B: I think that the generation that lived after the war was the one that needed sisu, but now, unfortunately, everything has to be a celebration and easy.”



On the other hand, many participants in the discussion think that the challenges of modern life are different and therefore require a different kind of sisu. Different generations have different lives and different understandings of sisu. Comparisons are therefore pointless.

“Different age groups and generations have different perceptions of what sisu is and what kind of sisu life requires. The older generation has experienced different things than young people. Life is different in one’s youth, and adversities are different at different times. Different kinds of sisu.”

While the older generations had to cope with physical challenges, today more attention is paid to mental well-being.

“If we think back a few generations, sisu meant being able to cope physically. Getting food, coping with circumstances. No attention was paid to the psychological component. It meant coping in primitive conditions and moving forward. Older generations tend to think that worrying about mental health is pointless nonsense. The meaning of the word sisu has changed, but it is still associated with survival.”

“Post-war youth were forced to make do with little. The only thing that mattered was what was inside: I can cope, I have sisu, the whole nation can cope. Men who had been to war built houses without legs or hands. They worked together, their spirits broken.”

A Finnish National treasure or a universal human trait?

Finns can be proud of their sisu. It is precisely the many stories associated with sisu that make the concept special, one that cannot be summed up in a single word. In addition to Väinö Linna, many other authors have written about Finnish sisu in their works.

“I read Laila Hirvisaari’s Imatra series, and sisu comes up in those books. There are women and men, young and old. Many things have become clearer through that.”

“I remember that even my grandparents talked about Finnish sisu, even though they lived in Sweden. It applies to everything. It is part of the National mythology.”

In the rare disease group, the participants even wondered whether sisu is part of the Finnish genetic makeup.

Many participants felt that sisu can be found in anyone, regardless of nationality or origin. Especially in discussions involving immigrants, the interpretation of sisu as a uniquely Finnish trait was questioned. For example, in the so-called global south, people currently live in much more challenging conditions than in Finland or Europe. In these countries, people really need sisu much more in their everyday lives than Finns do.

“There is a folk tale in Ukraine about two frogs that ended up in a jar of sour cream. One frog thought that it was all over and drowned. The other frog struggled and struggled with its legs until the sour cream turned into butter, and the frog was able to get out of the jar. Sometimes it is enough to just keep struggling and not give up.”

“Sisu is a Finnish concept, but it can be found in every nation, otherwise the nation will not succeed.”

“There are many kinds of sisu, and everyone has it, regardless of where they come from.”

“You came to Finland from Iran, and you have used sisu in a Finnish way of thinking. In that sense, it is part of National mythology that we Finns are unyielding, but are people elsewhere lazy? What the f*ck.”

If it is part of Finnish identity, one might ask when an immigrant is so accepted into Finnish society, that they can describe their own actions or attitude with the word sisu. Is the term monocultural and therefore exclusionary? Are only the heroic deeds of white Finnish men considered sisu? In a discussion among immigrants, the question arose as to whether immigrants have the right to use the concept of sisu. The participants gave the following answers:

“A: A person with sisu does not ask for permission.

B: Yes, we all need perseverance and we can use sisu.

C: Everyone has sisu.

D: Sisu is essential for immigrants – you can develop it in yourself in any country.”

The discussions also referred to equivalents of sisu in other languages. In English, there are the terms “grit” and “resilience”. One discussion compared it to the concept of energy management used in Asian culture. In Jewish culture, the word “chutzpah” is used, whose basic meaning is related to impudence and breaking boundaries. Positive chutzpah is the courage to speak up, take space or make demands. Immigrants could expand the concept of sisu through their own language and culture.

“Ask others if they have sisu, like the Finns. Although sisu is an established concept in Finnish culture, similar traits of perseverance, willpower and tenacity can be found in many other cultures. The difference is often in how these traits are named or how they manifest themselves. For example, the term sisu often refers to perseverance and passion for achieving long-term goals regardless of difficulties.”

A character trait or the result of upbringing?

Discussants ponder whether sisu is an innate character trait and how it is influenced by the living environment and upbringing. Some people seem to have more sisu by nature. On the other hand, it is difficult to distinguish whether upbringing or life circumstances have required a person to be persevering from an early age. This is how some people with disabilities and their loved ones think.

“Sisu has been a starting point in my own life. Others also assume that I am persevering. I am cheerful and positive by nature, and I wonder whether this is my true nature or whether it is just what has always been expected of me. For example, when an assistive device breaks, you wait for hours for someone to come and look at it, and the whole week can be ruined. It is interesting to consider whether resilience is learned or a character trait.”

“I worked a lot with marginalised young people. The values and upbringing they received at home were very important. If you learn from home that nothing is worth doing, that life is miserable, i.e. a pessimistic upbringing, how can you create a spark of hope? That I can do things differently. Intergenerational misery is evident.”

The discussions also explore how people develop sisu. Many people agree that appropriate challenges strengthen sisu. Sisu can also be found if someone close to you encourages you at just the right moment. But you cannot give it to someone else: the proverb ‘water carried in a bucket does not stay in the well’, idiomatic meaning “what is given freely is soon gone”, is appropriate for sisu.

“Is sisu already within us, or does it emerge, for example, in the face of adversity?”

“Everyone has sisu, but people are different. Some show it immediately, while in others it lies deeper. There may be someone close to you who can bring it out in you. A single word can change another person’s life.”

“Sisu is largely innate; either you have it or you don’t. You can always cheer others on, but you can’t transfer sisu from one person to another. In basketball, for example, you can cheer on the players by saying, ‘Play well, and you’ll win the trophy and have a party tomorrow.’”



4. Why do we need sisu today?

Everyday life and life crises

Sisu is needed to cope with everyday life. Sometimes just getting out of bed in the morning, especially in the darkness of winter, requires sisu. Learning digital skills requires sisu from older people, because all services are becoming digital. Similarly, taking care of one's own health is a challenge in everyday life.

**“Concerns for people living alone:
The struggle to prepare healthy and varied meals for just one person.
The struggle to get out and take care of one's physical condition. The struggle to go for a walk or exercise.”**

“Sisu, e.g. cycling every day, is a determined everyday activity.”

Studying and learning are particularly challenging for students, while learning Finnish or Swedish is a challenge for immigrants. Working life is busy, and families with children face the challenges of the busy years.

“It takes sisu to study or work, or even both at the same time. Raising children requires sisu. Many new Finns find it difficult to learn new languages.”

“Sisu is needed in many things, and I realised while knitting that I need more of it and that I admire people who are good at crafts, but I always struggle with making socks. I haven't had enough sisu to learn how to do it neatly, so I always unravel it or it ends up as a leg warmer. So, I need sisu when it comes to knitting.”



The following quote describes the challenges of everyday life and how financial hardship or concern about the state of the world can drain your energy and make it harder to cope with everyday life.

“The current rise in the cost of living means that it takes a lot to get by if you don’t have a high income. Living in financial hardship requires sisu. Getting up in the morning requires sisu. Coping with the cold of winter requires sisu. Getting through everyday life requires sisu. Sisus has been required to study alongside work. Everyday life requires grit. Sisus is needed today as people struggle with mental health issues. Even though there is no war now, we have to follow the war in the media. It also takes sisu to be able to process war-related issues in some way. We cannot underestimate the things that require sisu from others. Something that may seem insignificant to us may be very important to someone else. Today’s flood of information is overwhelming and becomes part of everyday life.”

The discussions highlight that people have very different life situations and resources. What is easy for one person may be an extremely challenging task for another. It is impossible to assess the level of challenge from the outside. For example, from the perspective of a disabled person, everyday challenges are described as follows:

“Sisu is also required because, even if you receive all the help you can get, you still have to live with your disability every day.”

“Alongside coping, sisu also means adapting, constantly rebuilding your life and working on acceptance.”

In a group of different learners, matters requiring sisu are described as follows:

“A: I have to work harder than normal students.”

B: It is difficult to apply for support when you have comprehension difficulties. You cannot stand up for yourself. You do not always get understanding. For example, I am unable to take oral exams.

C: When you work hard, teachers don’t understand that you have to do 10 times the work to get by.”

Life involves various crises, such as illness or the death of a loved one. Recovering from illness and rehabilitation also requires sisu.

“Losing my grandmother in the summer came as a surprise, and coping with it required time to process the situation. Sisu can be found in major life changes.”

“Right now, we are undergoing a major renovation and moving to temporary accommodation. The chaos around us requires sisu, and it is enough to know the significance of the different tasks in this whole process.”

In the fathers’ support group sisu was discussed as follows:

“Sisu is needed to gain distance from one’s own emotional state and to keep in mind the primacy of the child’s interests. Sisu is needed to maintain composure when emotions are running high and when the child is involved in the separation.”

Immigrants have found that adapting to a new culture and integrating requires constant perseverance. Language cannot be learned in an instant but must be practised in everyday life. And you have to be persistent in speaking Finnish to Finns, even if you don’t know it very well yet.

“It takes sisu to learn Finnish and study the language, even though it is difficult to find someone to talk to in Finnish. It takes sisu to integrate into Finnish society. People treat us well, but we need to learn the language quickly.”

“All forms of immigration, whether voluntary or forced, involve stress and sacrifice. Asylum seekers need sisu to get through the waiting periods, which can last for years. When you cannot change the situation, you hold on to your sisu so that you do not give up. Maintaining a relationship during immigration requires sisu; it is difficult. Cultural differences require patience, which is also sisu. When communicating with social, commercial and government services, you need sisu to dare to communicate in Finnish. Sisu is waiting: when you are waiting for a letter, a decision, a document, a job, etc.”

“I used to be so sad. I stopped last year. I cried every day. There are things I can’t cope with. I stopped crying and being sad. We needed help, and I did it myself. I stopped many things, and it’s much better now. I stopped crying. Because the Finnish language is so difficult, and things are so difficult. Now I know what I have to do. Now it’s fine. I decided that I wouldn’t cry but would do things instead. There are many words that are difficult.”

The challenges of living in Finland

Both immigrants and native Finns share the experience that sisu is needed in Finnish climatic conditions. Dialogues have been held in the autumn, and the darkness of autumn and the first frosty mornings require a tenacious attitude to survival.

Society is perceived as having become more complex and fragmented, which is reflected in increased bureaucracy. Of course, immigrants may be even more lost than native Finns in the jungle of bureaucracy, as poor language skills make it difficult to understand structures that are already complex. In relation to the care of elderly and disabled people, one example mentioned is the assessment of service needs, which both clients and their relatives may experience as 'exhausting bureaucracy'.

"In matters about health, I have encountered situations where examinations are delayed and take a long time, which requires determination from me and my partner to persevere. I have had to rely on the mercy of society. Personal determination is also needed in society."

"So that disabled people can get help. It requires perseverance and grit. This raises the question of when sisu becomes unreasonable. In my volunteer work, I have followed people who have recently become disabled and heard about mistreatment in disability services."

They have gone to ask for help with their situation and have been told to 'look it up online'."

Even professionals may find bureaucracy challenging. The following quote describes this and bold solutions for helping clients.

"I once moved from Helsinki to a small town, and in a new place you have to be suitably stubborn. Social work requires grit, so that you don't give up when you want to help clients. You need a slightly anarchistic mindset; there is always a way or a solution to help others. It is easy to be determined in a small town; if you dare to ask, you will always find someone who can help. Things work out when you dare to ask. You can see decision-makers even in a shop and just ask them boldly. In a big city, that is not possible."

Living with economic uncertainty in Finland at the moment requires sisu. Low-income earners need sisu to cope with everyday expenses, as do the unemployed when looking for work. Those in work need sisu to do their jobs and live with uncertainty. Young people and immigrants are particularly challenged in their resilience when it comes to finding their first job or summer job. Entrepreneurs need sisu to tolerate failure and build a new start. Decision-makers also need sisu to make difficult decisions.

“The current rise in the cost of living means that it is difficult to get by without a high income. Living in financial hardship requires sisu.”

“If I start with the economy, for example, the employment situation here in Finland is pretty dire at the moment. Quite a few of my friends and acquaintances have recently become unemployed or been laid off. I work as a specialist in a medium-sized company, and we are afraid that we will also have to go through redundancy negotiations. It takes grit to keep working hard and make long-term plans, even though the future of working life is uncertain. And if you do end up unemployed and looking for work, you just have to keep applying for jobs, because there are usually a lot of applicants for each vacancy. I know people who keep writing application after application, even though they keep getting rejected.”

The struggle for statutory services in a crumbling welfare state

A recurring theme in the data was a certain sense of unfairness or unreasonability. This perspective was particularly prominent in groups dealing with issues related to people with disabilities, family carers, the elderly, children, and young people. The underlying idea is that our society demands unreasonable sisu from certain groups and those who advocate for them. They are forced to persistently demand things that should be the rights of every citizen. Even though we are not at war, many of us are fighting every day.

“Services that are required by law, but which we still have to fight for.”

“(Sisu) is needed to ensure that disabled people receive the support they need.”

Members of councils for the elderly and disabled felt that keeping the perspective of disabled and elderly people in the spotlight requires exhausting determination and hard work, and even then, the message is not always heard.

“The response (from the municipality/welfare sector) is often that ‘there is so little money’, but if only they would do what the law requires! There may be a situation where the welfare area committee has a representative from the elderly council, but some issues have already been dealt with by the committees and can no longer be influenced. The right to be present is of no use if there is no opportunity to influence.”

“The issues affecting older people must be kept in the spotlight. Accessibility is declining; digitalisation and mobility. The statutory rights of older people are being violated all the time. Fortunately, Päivi Topo is defending the interests of older people in Parliament. The purchasing power of pensions is declining. Grants to organisations are declining. Statements and articles in the local newspaper. You have to familiarise yourself with the issues and know what you are talking about in order to be able to influence matters. The new Council for the Elderly is trusted. Perseverance is needed, ‘through thick and thin’.”

“Applying for services and explaining one’s situation to the authorities is perceived as burdensome and humiliating. Not all disabilities are recognised equally well – for example, rare or externally invisible disabilities may go unnoticed in the service system, making it difficult to obtain support. Restricting mobility to, for example, two trips a week threatens a dignified life. “Order food to your home” solutions do not replace the opportunity to participate in society.”

During the discussions, it was felt that the deterioration of services in a crumbling welfare state also makes life a constant struggle for people on low incomes and those dependent on care. Services are being cut back and savings are being made in areas that are essential to a dignified life, such as banking services, home help, rehabilitation and even hygiene/cleanliness.

“Being in poor health creates insecurity, and the way people are treated nowadays – sudden transfers from one place to another, no rehabilitation whatsoever, no suitable follow-up care – is frightening when you find yourself in such a situation, being treated in such an undignified manner.”

“If you have relatives, you can manage somehow. Talking about these things does make you feel more determined. ”

“Modern times create insecurity. Banking services have disappeared from the locality and moved online, which people do not know how to use.”

“Insecurity is currently caused by (--) the deterioration of services, for example in the welfare sector. It’s terrifying where this is going; home care staff are being cut, but at the same time the aim is for as many people as possible to live at home for as long as possible. Many people live in remote areas and have long journeys. This trend is causing anxiety. Bed spaces are being concentrated in Rovaniemi and partly in Kemi, and I wonder about the decision-makers who live in Helsinki. This situation requires determination to find a way to deal with these issues.”

“Too often, grit is thought of as an individual trait, but sometimes it needs to be said out loud that some structures are flawed. For example, if you have to fight for your basic needs. For example, certain shower days now mean that you have to anticipate when staff will be available. For example, I have heard from elderly care that you are allowed to shower once a week, and you should be satisfied if you get to do it three times a week. I am in my thirties, and the change from being 18 has been significant. I am concerned about what the world will be like when I am in my sixties. Where will the demand for resilience lead? I worry about whether I will receive social and health services, and I have to be on my toes so that my services are not taken away. In certain circles, you have to be capable, and in other contexts, you have to be disabled. I am afraid of saying something wrong and having my services taken away.”

The lack of services is humiliating, and the fact that those who advocate for the vulnerable resort to sisu forces them to behave more aggressively than they would like to. Those for whom no one speaks up are left behind.

“Shouldn’t we be a society, and now that we are living in difficult times, it sometimes feels like we are against society or society is against us citizens. That’s when you need sisu, when you’re fighting for a place for an elderly person who can no longer live at home. What is resilience, in my opinion, if society says that we have 100,000 elderly people and 50,000 care places for them – there is no resilience if citizens are left to care for the elderly and take time off work. I think I have found resilience when I have had to take care of care places for my parents, a bitchy, businesslike bitch who has demanded and taken care of things on behalf of society. It is not right that those who shout the loudest get their way. I would not want to be that kind of citizen, but rather one who has the resilience/sisu to adapt to difficult times.”

Defending the local school was also highlighted as something that requires this kind of unreasonable sisu.

“A: I was walking my dog and thinking about what grit means to the village, and yes, it is the school where the villagers have shown their grit. When you have to defend the school all the time, it is hard work. You could send a message to the decision-makers that the school could be an attraction.

B: It is indeed the school that has required grit; people have fought for it for 40 years.”

Security and global challenges

Concerns about security in Finland and global problems such as climate change and the destruction of nature emerge as clear themes in the dialogues. However, there are clearly fewer mentions of these than of the topics described above, which are closer to people's everyday lives. It could be argued that *sisu* is associated with issues that can be influenced by taking action. Therefore, global and abstract topics may be in the minority in this material. However, the discussions reveal that these threats cause anxiety and sap the strength needed to cope with everyday life. On the other hand, focusing on one's own everyday life and immediate circle can also help one cope better.

“Even though there is no war at the moment, we are forced to follow the war in the media. It also takes *sisu* to be able to process war-related issues in some way.”

According to one participant, the insecurity created by the global situation could be the reason why people in Finland are afraid to spend money.

“I feel the same way and wonder why people are surprised that people are not spending money. Insecurity automatically causes people to hold back on spending and put their money under the mattress, when they should be preparing for the future. But at the same time, they should be spending.”

Discussions also recognise a cultural shift in relation to National security.

“I have been critical of *sisu* lately. Our systematic preparation for war is veiled in rhetoric. We talk about things with the voice of angels. We must also take a critical look at this. This discussion has been brought into everyday street life and the news. Armed soldiers are an everyday sight, weekly training is considered normal. This is a big change in Finnish culture.”

When it comes to climate change, we need the determination to endure the situation, find ways and the strength to slow it down, and adapt to life in a changed climate in the future.

“Climate-related issues. It can also be paralysing, but for one reason or another, it can also inspire *sisu*, and we should put all our *sisu* into it.”

“Imagination is also linked to this: if there is hope and visions for the future, we need *sisu* to act on them and promote them. When there are widespread pessimistic issues, environmental crises, and everything has gone global, it may be necessary to limit the area in which one can have an impact. It is worth breaking down large, global issues into smaller parts that one can influence. It can bring perseverance to pursue these issues.

Sisu might be something we need for a 50-year, for a hundred-year vision of Finland. For example, surviving climate change.”

Democracy in our diversifying society

About a quarter of the dialogues discuss the challenges of a diversifying society. Participants express concern about the position of minorities and racism. In addition to, immigrants express their desire to integrate into Finnish society and, on the other hand, how difficult it can be at times. The discussions express sympathy in particular for Ukrainian immigrants.

“We talked about minorities, many different minorities whose position in society is not strong. The Sámi are one group, and the treatment of the Sámi in Finland is a shameful stain.”

“My first goal in Finland was to learn about Finnish culture and history so that I could find my place in my new country. Before, I just thought that Santa Claus was a goat’s child, but now I understand what it really means. What Russia did to Finland, it is now doing to Ukraine; we have a similar history. There should be more cultural exchange, because when people find this kind of interaction, they find new relationships and a happy life. I need more courage, because I don’t feel like I belong here and I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing. It was wonderful to hear about other people’s experiences, and hopefully they can inspire me to be brave too.”

“One feels empathy for those who have fled a country that is being destroyed (such as Ukraine) and who have the strength to go through that grief.”

In a polarised atmosphere, it takes courage to oppose racism and defend democracy.

“Opposing racism is not easy. Say “no to racism”. I mean government agencies and such. Yesterday, a headmaster said that racism has increased and that he has also been targeted when he tries to defend people by saying “you can’t do that and racism is wrong”. Hate that stems from racist thinking also targets people from the majority population. I hope that through the sisu dialogue, the government will understand that racism must continue to be combated everywhere.”

“Maintaining democracy and well-being requires sisu. It requires sisu to understand that we have many opinions and that there are no black-and-white solutions. Promoting democracy today requires sisu. Let’s keep our society as it is, so that it is worth defending. So that there is no polarisation. It takes courage to hold on to diversity and prevent polarisation. Finns are essentially a thoughtful and pluralistic people. How we value each other and get along with others. There is a lot of discord and unpleasant encounters, even though this does not always have to be the case.”



“We do indeed have other security threats besides Russia, and we are not so united in our approach to these threats. It seems that it is often difficult to have a proper discussion, a dialogue, on issues such as immigration. If we were able to have better discussions about these issues, we could be more united in the face of security threats. I think discussions about immigration should be more nuanced and not just black and white. Such discussions have taken place, but in my opinion, not enough.”

In one discussion, the question arises as to whether sisu could become a unifying factor for all people living in Finland. This would require a redefinition of the images associated with sisu.

“In fact, that last point is what I was thinking about: how to channel it into the common good and the creation of a new kind of society. How will sisu be viewed in the future, now that we already have a multicultural society? There are those of us who have sisu, and then there are others. It would be something that would not exclude anyone. It takes sisu to strengthen National identity in such a way that others can also share that identity.”

“The slogan ‘Suo, kuokka ja Jussi’ (The swamp, the hoe and Jussi) needs to be updated. Not just the swamp, but the whole world. The hoe is no longer just a hoe; we have many tools. Jussi is no longer just Jussi; he is joined by Yusuf.”

Concern for young people

Adults, some of whom work with young people, raise their concerns about young people in many dialogues. They believe that in the current social and global situation, young people have lost hope for a better tomorrow. They insist that children and young people should be listened to. Young people need encouragement and hope in these times. The availability of mental health services is also considered important.

A: Concern for young people, it's not an easy time, either socially or globally.

B: I have a long life behind me and can be confident that we will manage, but young people are in a different situation, with climate change, social events and wars.

C: Young people no longer have it easy. They have and need perseverance, but the outcome is not necessarily good; for example, they may not find work.

D: The goals set in almost all fields are too high, external expectations are so high, you have to be highly educated, and even that does not guarantee a job."

"We are the happiest country in the world, but at the same time we have incomprehensibly large problems, especially with young people's mental health. Mental health issues and related phenomena among children and young people have increased in recent years. I would say that there are three basic needs that all people have, but young people in particular. And they are very poorly met in this society. The first is a sense of meaning and purpose in life. I'm not saying that it's not met at all, but it's poorly met. The second is a sense of belonging. They are related. If you don't belong to anything meaningful, you join a group – that's also a sense of belonging, but perhaps not a constructive one. The third is that the world 'makes sense'. That there is some logic in all the confusion. That you can zoom out and see: it looks chaotic up close, but from a distance, there is some logic to it. These three things are not very well realised in our society. And young people and children are the most sensitive to this. All of this affects our sense of resilience and security."

5. How can we strengthen our sisu?

Together we are stronger

Sisu is not a static or purely innate trait but is often created and strengthened through interaction with others. Almost all discussions focused on strengthening sisu collectively. The discussions described various communities, such as village communities, work communities, city neighbourhoods and hobby groups, where people do things together and help each other at the same time. Often, helping can be subtle and quiet.

“That is the whole point of community: sisu is not about ‘I can do it alone’. That is not sisu – it is stupidity, not realising that you need others. As you said, a person cannot be anything on their own. And even though here in Finland there is a tradition of living apart and keeping to oneself, there has always been a very strong sense of community here. Even though I have an immigrant background, I have grown up in Finland for 50 years and spent all my summers in the countryside south of Oulu. That Finnish sense of community was unassuming, quiet – but very real. And it was sisu: doing things together.”

Support from peers strengthens resilience. Simply sharing experiences of difficulties makes things easier. Stories of survival and overcoming difficulties, shared at group meetings or even through podcasts, help people find resilience.

“A: Sometimes it helps to know that others have had similar experiences. Perhaps it is a source of resilience to know that others have faced similar difficulties and that someone has overcome them.”

B: It’s also important to say that it hasn’t always been easy, even though I’m a cheerful person. It can still be painful.

C: Have we managed to highlight peer support here too? Peer support plays an important role in sharing information and pain.”

“Peer support is very powerful. If apathy prevails, but there is someone who succeeds and finds solutions. It changes your way of thinking. If you are stuck in the belief that you cannot do anything differently, but you see that someone else is doing it, it affects what you believe you can do yourself.”

“We have shared the stories of families with special needs children in our podcast – often there are like-minded people in communities, and a positive circle feeds goodness.”

The power of identification and example is great. You can borrow someone else's sisu and use it to keep going for a while. We are always fellow human beings, and sometimes a few encouraging words can be crucial in helping someone else find their sisu.

"Another person's sisu can help you too."

"You can borrow sisu. If someone else is struggling, you can step in and carry on for them for a while."

"Is it a bad thing if you have no sisu at all? Anyone who meets a person with sisu will start to pull them along. Little by little, they will rise. A depressed person needs another person to pull them out of their listlessness."

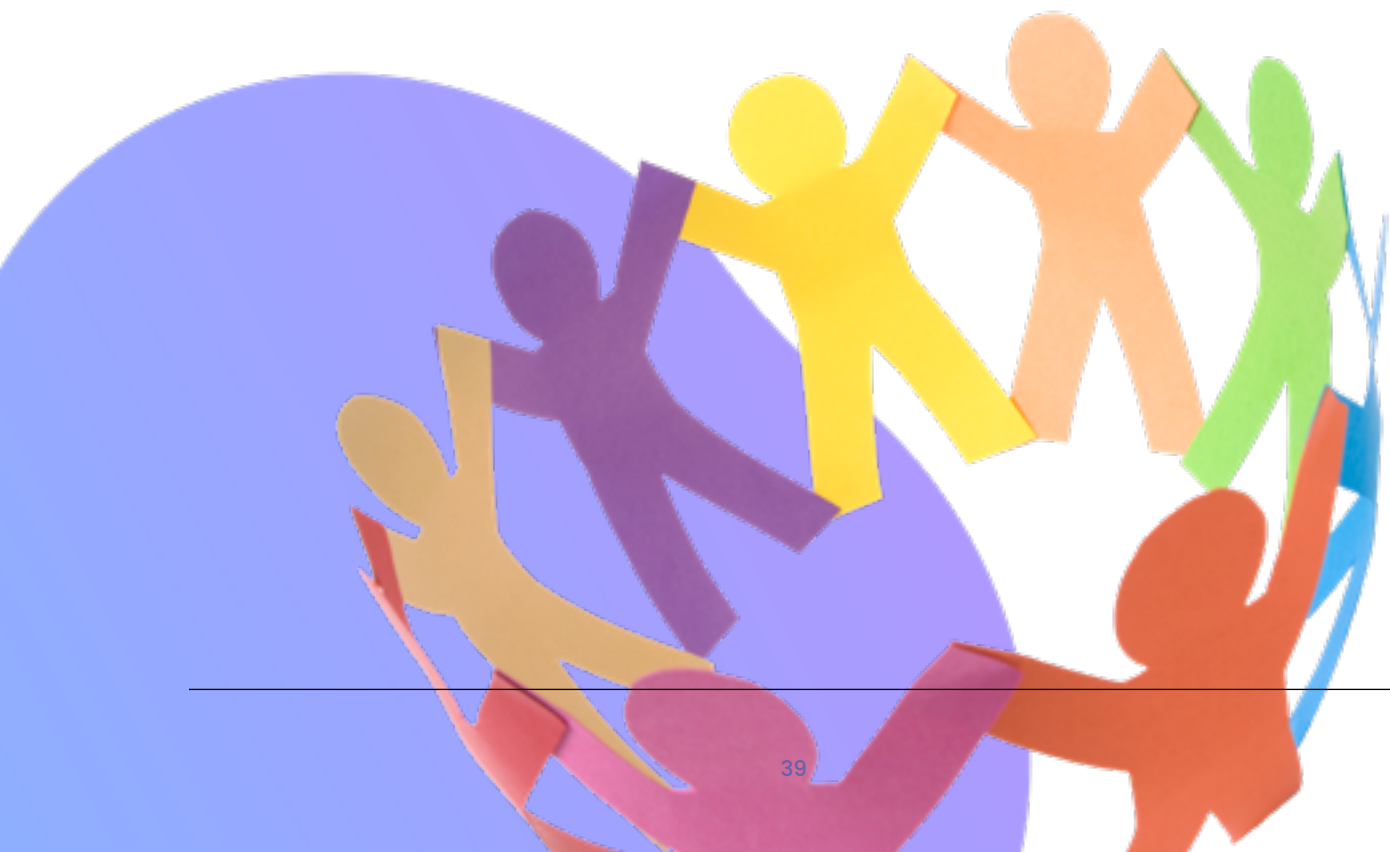
"Everyone has sisu, but people are different. Some show it right away, while in others it lies deeper. There may be someone close to you who can bring it out in you. A single word can change another person's life."

Belonging to a community gives a person a sense of meaning: I am important, I matter. A common goal that everyone is working towards further strengthens this feeling.

"A: On the other hand, sisu is also quite an everyday thing and a shared resource for working towards something. B: And when it comes to hobbies, it's that sense of community. Being part of a group definitely gives you strength and sisu when you feel that you are important and that you matter."

C: That feeling of importance is probably another source of strength. That there is something important in me."

B: I think we all need to feel that we are important and that we have something that others value."



Groups representing disabled people and older people highlighted many social injustices that require patience to influence. People easily become frustrated on their own, but working together and sharing responsibility helps to maintain determination. It is worth joining forces.

“And you can share the burden with a group, so it’s lighter when everyone pushes together. I also think about our project world and developer activities, that you can’t do this alone, but when there’s a bigger group behind you. When you create and do something new, it takes grit. On the other hand, sisu is also quite an everyday thing and a shared resource for working towards something.”

“We are stronger together. The people around us provide empowering support, comfort and hope. There is hope for all living things. Gratitude for having someone to talk to about difficult things. What can we do together to bring about sisu? Encourage, comfort and help each other.”

The discussions identify many situations in which cooperation would produce better results than fighting alone or solely on behalf of one’s own group. Equal dialogue that transcends boundaries between parties, administrative sectors, organisations or people with different ways of thinking would help to see things more clearly and make wiser decisions. However, organising such situations and joint discussions requires determination.

“It helps if we can engage in joint dialogue. Equal discussion in society is important. A sense of community ensures that there will be enough grit in the future.”

“If only the parties could cooperate. We are so focused on our own party’s goals that we don’t want to listen to others. That’s how it seems to be.”

“All actors must be recognised. No municipality, welfare area or organisation can manage on its own. Together, everyone can help those in a more vulnerable position and foster sisu.”



Strong people and the professionals can support the weaker

When peer support and support from the local community are no longer enough, professionals are needed to help. Anyone can find themselves in a situation where they run out of strength. In such cases, it is easy to give up. Older people, people with disabilities, young people, people recovering from mental health issues and the unemployed may then stay at home or otherwise withdraw from society.

"A: When an individual's strength is gone, I have noticed that older people give up. They feel that they have 'failed' and their determination runs out. At that point, they need support to maintain their agency and get help to take care of things. They do not always have relatives who can help, or their relatives live so far away that they are unable to help.

B: I would turn that idea around a bit and ask whether service providers or care providers should listen more carefully so that people do not have to fight so hard for the help they need. Those whose job it is to help should be able to recognise people's needs."

Professionals have many ways to support people's agency. Prevention is also important with different customer groups.

"In my own work, I strive to ensure that when a client calls or interacts with me, they leave feeling empowered and with more tools to take care of things, so that we can strengthen the client's right to self-determination, and everyone can make decisions about matters concerning themselves. It is paradoxical that the Self-Determination Act is not progressing during this government term, even though it is really about restrictive measures."

"For example, some students skip classes and don't do their assignments, and when I intervene, I hear something like, "What does it matter/I don't care, I'm not going to get a job anyway." These young people usually have a background of unemployment and a sense of hopelessness in their immediate circle. My approach has been to encourage these young people to talk about their concerns and feelings and to listen without judgement to what they have to say. I tell them that I understand their experiences, and then I always try to find stories about people who have found their own path during difficult times. I also try to help young people set small goals that are easy to achieve and that boost their self-confidence. Well, sometimes these things seem to help, but there are always young people who fall by the wayside. Unfortunately, this is also the case in better times."

If cooperation can identify situations where people need help, they or their advocates would not have to fight so hard.

“It occurs to me that it is usually customary to react with determination when action is needed, or things have already gone wrong. If we tried to act proactively, we would not always have to defend our rights and fight for them.”

Organisations play an important role as a bridge between the support provided by loved ones and professional support. Organisations can help people understand their rights. People may resign themselves to administrative decisions because they do not have the sisu to question them.

“It seems unreasonable to demand courage in such a situation. In such a situation, people need care and advice; they need to understand their rights. What are the things that weaken courage? People resign themselves to decisions that weaken them and accept that this is happening. They think that there is nothing they can do about decisions made by the government or welfare services, for example. There are two sides to courage.”

The power of gentle positivity

From the perspective of soft sisu and resilience, sisu is paradoxically strengthened by being kind to oneself. Kindness towards oneself helps to maintain sisu in the long term without exhaustion. Life is more like a marathon than a sprint. Self-compassion is reflected in how you talk to yourself, especially in difficult situations, but also in how you treat yourself and the choices you make in everyday life.

“And it’s important to be able to relax and reflect. Especially at night, if you have to stay awake, that’s when the threats start spinning around in your head and everything seems much worse when you’re alone and it’s dark and you know you should be sleeping and gathering your strength. Then they start to swirl around and pile up. So, the ways to get yourself to let go of things and focus on the moment. They are often hard to find, especially in the most difficult moments.”

“Is it a matter of engaging in internal dialogue, talking to yourself calmly? That this is how things are right now, and it’s stressful or distressing or worrying, but you can reassure yourself that it’s temporary. Things fall into perspective after a walk. People need that fresh air. And time for thoughts. Calming yourself down and settling into the moment, knowing that you will get through this. That kind of internal dialogue. Recognising your own limits and taking care of them is also part of the skill of self-care.”

A positive view of sisu is coloured by hope, a belief that things will be better in the future or that we will be able to handle them better. Positive sisu also involves noticing positive developments in oneself, others, communities and society. Sisu is not strengthened by painting a picture of threats or repeating negative stories. The media plays an important role, but administrative actors, communities and individual citizens can also be proactive in spreading a positive atmosphere.

“Sharing and doing good things feeds positive sisu.”

“The question was raised earlier about how to maintain hope when things are invariably negative and unfavourable for people with disabilities. Is there a way to highlight successes? There was an annual calendar where we could highlight our successes, such as statements and opinions, at. Sometimes even the volume can bring hope, the fact that there has been dialogue with decision-makers.”

“We should communicate these things in a positive way, for example, this Suomi.fi that we have been talking about. And provide more background information and tell people where they can learn. We should use the Imagining a Good Future method. It could be very well suited to these digital issues, because if we imagine that these things are good, how did we get here?”

By doing things that require sisu and facing difficulties

According to the participants, sisu is strengthened by doing things that require sisu. Life offers these opportunities generously.

“What builds grit is what the world throws at you and your ability to keep developing, no matter what.”

“When you feel threatened and helpless because your child is not getting the life you want for them, that’s when your sisu kicks in. Good quality of life, I persevered, it was worth it and it paid off. After that, I realised that I have sisu. In order for a child to get help and support and be treated right, you need sisu (parent). At work, they say I don’t accept ‘no’ for an answer; I’ll find that help somewhere.”

“I’ve been doing a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle for a week now, and I’m determined. It’s full of green. If I don’t lose my temper there either, then I’ll fight with our desktop computer and laptop, and then with my mobile phone.”

It's also important to give yourself permission to fail and try again, because perseverance grows through enduring adversity. Failures are easier to endure when both you and those around you are understanding when they happen.

"You learn to be resilient when you are allowed to fail and try again. Others support you, and you are surrounded by the love of your loved ones."

Stepping outside your comfort zone requires sisu, but it can be beneficial. You may need the help of others to encourage you to face disappointment. Adults can strengthen children's and young people's ability to face difficulties honestly.

"Part of Finnish grit is that you toughen up when you work hard – when you have to fail and do things, you develop and grow. That's a bit of a sick idea, but at the same time you said that you have to practise to get better. And part of me thinks that when we talked about this influence – whether we are influenced and whether the outer shell is thin – I'm terribly afraid to say this out loud, but part of me thinks that it's okay for us to break that shell a little. Because it forces us to wake up to the fact that is that shell really as strong as it should be? Are we focused on the right things in life and in the world? Have we been tested? "

"Children should also be taught to cope on their own and to endure boredom and disappointment; this builds resilience and is part of life. On the other hand, one also wants to help. "

"Grit requires challenges in life in order to develop. If things are too easy for too long, it can be difficult to find grit when you need it. If you have lived a life where you have been pampered and helped too much, it is difficult to cope later on when you need willpower and grit."

However, with small, realistic steps, a person can achieve their goals. This strengthens self-confidence. Rejoicing in successes also strengthens sisu.

"Where does grit come from? From success. You have to create opportunities for success and make things visible."

"Things that come easily do not bring true happiness. We believe that happiness comes from making an effort and achieving something – it leads to new things."

Overall, the discussions reveal that participants find both old and new ways to strengthen sisu in Finland. In many of the final summaries of the discussions, participants also say that this kind of dialogue creates hope for the future and strengthens their belief that difficult issues can be resolved or at least made easier by working together with others.

6. Borderland dialogues

The borderland dialogues were organised as part of the sisu dialogues, but their focus was on reflecting on the sense of security that has been shaken by Russia's military actions. Participants were asked to consider: What role do you see your organisation or yourself playing in this situation? What kind of support do you need to strengthen your own activities? How could the sisu and solidarity of people and communities in Finland be strengthened?

The following is a separate summary of Borderlands dialogues. It answers the questions: What does the border and living on the border mean to those who live there? What challenges the sense of security and what brings it? The last subchapter summarises what was discussed in the Borderlands dialogues and compares it to the material from the Sisu dialogues.

What does living on the border mean to people?

Living on the border and the proximity of the eastern border mean many things to people, ranging from historical identity and a sense of everyday security to practical concerns and a new kind of preparedness. Based on the dialogues, it seems that the border unites those who live near it. In addition, the border is a constant reminder of the geographical location of one's place of residence.

The eastern border is seen as a unifying factor, which is also remembered by residents through previous generations and the history of evacuation. This is especially true for people with Karelian roots, as the border carries with it the history of their family's homeland. The current situation has triggered intergenerational feelings of anxiety in some people.

"The eastern border is a unifying factor that we all remember through previous generations, even though attempts have been made to conceal it, but it is in everyone's collective memory."

"For people with Karelian roots, the border region has many meanings, including the former border that enclosed their family's homeland and the borderlands of their minds and emotions. What if they can never again cross the border to see their parents' beloved places? The photos that were collected are of great significance. Right now, it still feels so raw that it is impossible to look at the photos."

Some feel that “the circle has closed” and we have returned to the time of our grandparents, when the border formed a dark curtain behind which nothing could be seen. This new closure of the border may therefore be perceived as threatening.

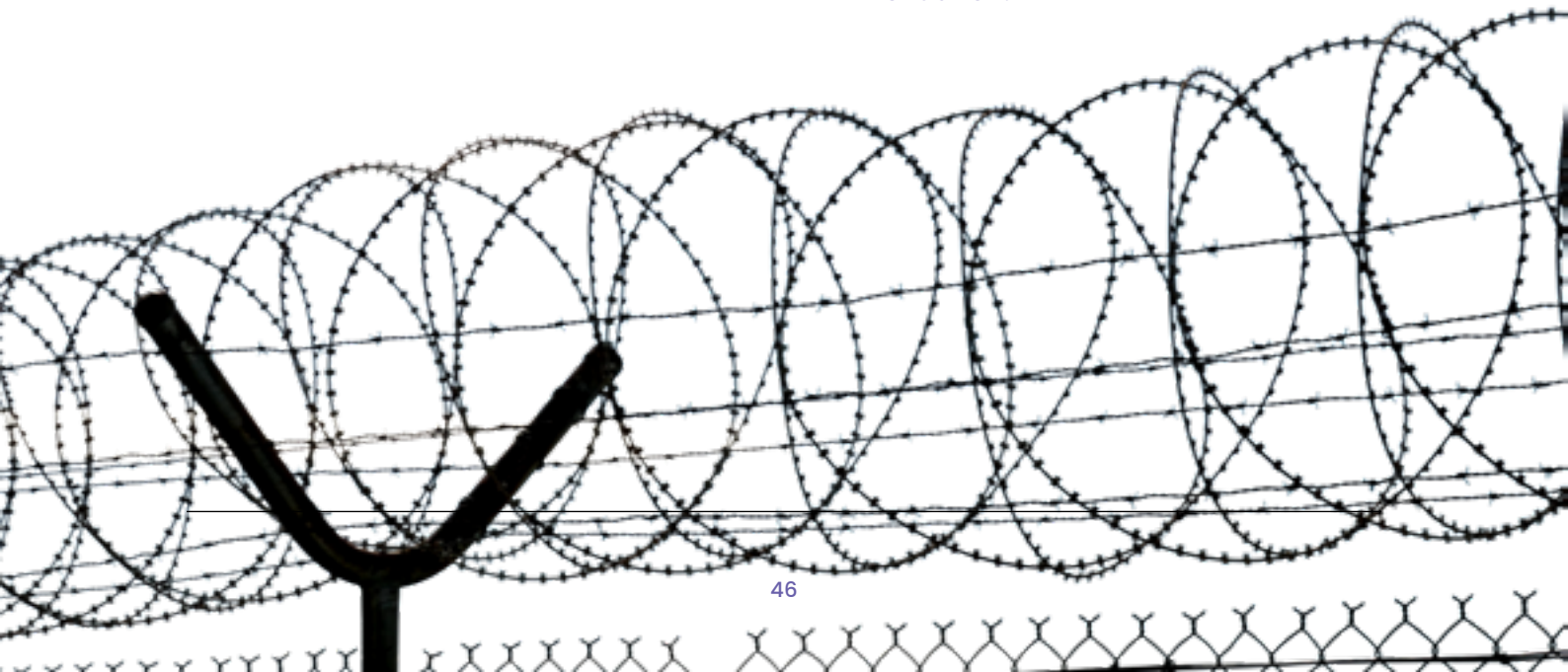
“One thing that came up was when you said that the circle is closing. We were just talking about that, when he went back there, and I’ve often wondered what it was like in my father’s childhood, or even in my grandparents’ childhood, when there was a curtain at the border. A dark curtain, behind which no one knew what was happening, and how strange it was. Then later, when we went there to eat and went to the shop, it was open all the time. Now we have somehow returned to the old days – the circle has closed, in a way – it’s the same situation, we don’t know what’s happening there. Of course, we have technology, but in a different way, all those contacts and so on, they’re cut off. That curtain has somehow closed completely.”

For many people living on the border, however, the location does not cause fear, but rather something they are used to.

“The border does not worry them at all. It has been there for ages... and will remain. They have other things on their minds.”

The closure of the border has severed the official and unofficial networks, friendships and trade that have developed over decades. For many immigrants, the closure of the border is a double-edged sword: it increases their sense of security in relation to Russia but makes it more difficult to maintain family relationships across the border.

“If the border is closed a little, Finns feel safer. But it’s a bad thing, because many Russians live in Finland, and I have a couple of Russian friends. They are in a really difficult situation because they want to go home... their family, their father and mother still live in Russia, and then they have to travel to northern Norway and a little bit to Estonia, and it’s a long journey, and yes, and also some Russians who now live in Finland feel bad... if you ask me whether it’s good or bad that the border is closed, it depends on the situation.”



What challenges the sense of security?

The factors threatening the sense of security of the discussants in the border areas vary from global geopolitics to very mundane, local concerns. The erosion of the sense of security is not only due to the proximity of the border, but often more broadly to the feeling that social support structures have weakened and continue to weaken.

However, the discussions focused most on the threats posed by Russia's war of aggression. Participants feel that the war has permanently changed the security environment. Many feel that the former 'bird's nest' is under threat. The prolongation of military operations and uncertainty about the future create constant background tension.

"Since childhood, we have been lulled into believing that war will never come to us. We have been forced to change our perceptions. By strengthening our own mental capital and resilience, we have been able to live without giving in to fear. If war broke out, our own children, spouses or family members would be caught up in it. That is a cause for concern."

"From the perspective of a home care worker, the elderly have had many worries and fears since Russia's invasion began in 2022, and discussions about these concerns continue to this day. Feelings of bitterness have also resurfaced in the elderly's conversations."

Hybrid influencing is a cause for concern, as are its consequences, which are visible in the form of concrete disruptions to telecommunications. The lack of coverage in some areas near the border is also a cause for concern. These issues are related to safety, as the lack of connectivity may prevent people from getting help in an emergency.

"Hybrid influence, the dissemination of false information and the withholding of important information are causes for concern."

"Russia's hybrid influence creates instability and causes harm to many parties. Due to Russia's actions, telecommunications at the border are operating at lower capacity and there are dead zones, while powerful telecommunications networks on the Russian side are disrupting communications on this side of the border. This is a security issue, as many services rely on telecommunications connections and it may be impossible to call the emergency services by telephone when an ambulance, fire brigade or accident assistance is needed."

"At first, it seemed that hybrid warfare was something that only affected large companies, but it appears that it can happen to anyone."

People living in the border zone notice constant air traffic and drones, which is reminiscent of a tense situation. For some, the construction of the new border fence has made the threat more concrete and brought with it feelings of insecurity.

“When you see a bird in your yard, you first check whether it is a drone or a crow. That’s how it happens. We live in the border zone, so we can’t help but pay attention to it. The construction of the fence. I expected it to bring a sense of security, but in fact it did not. It even made me feel unsafe. In a way, it made it more concrete, now there is this border, which has been there for decades, but somehow, now that there is a fence, there has been a low fence before, but in a different way. And yes, it does make an impression when the lights are turned on at night, because then you really know you’re in the border zone and you really feel unsafe, because you wonder what the hell is coming from there, or if anything is coming at all, whether it’s a moose or some other animal or nothing at all.”

Another major issue related to insecurity, which affects not only the border areas but also the Finnish countryside in general, is the decline in social services. The police and ambulance cannot be called quickly, and the health centre and local shop are a long way away. Without a car, it is difficult to get by in remote villages.

“The war of aggression has continued the decline that had already begun in the provinces of eastern Finland, and the government does not see any potential for investment here – is there some hidden agenda behind this? ”

“Health services must be guaranteed so that services do not move from Kitee to Joensuu. A mobile dental clinic visited Rääkkylä. Let’s organise something like this for remote villages. There is a three-month waiting list. What can be done is to set up a temporary location. Or you can get self-filling material from the pharmacy.”

The economic vitality of the border region is also a cause for concern. In south-eastern Finland in particular, the closure of the border has deprived entrepreneurs of their customer base. The lack of investment and the ageing population are causing concern about the future of these areas. The feeling that the border region is being ‘forgotten’ is eroding confidence in the government.

“I have to come back to entrepreneurship. A small defence of entrepreneurship here, because the closure of the borders really did reduce the income streams and customer volumes of both small and large entrepreneurs here, and if we compare this situation to that in Central Finland, then each of us understands if you are here in the middle of Finland and draw a circle around you. There are quite a lot of people, many kilometres in every direction. If we are here in the south-east corner in Virolahti. First of all, we have water in the south, and we used to have the east, where we had people and customer volume, and now it is here, a single sector (1/4 of the circle). This has already forced entrepreneurs here to completely revamp their business models. I believe that almost all entrepreneurs here have started looking for different ways to put food on the table, but when there is no volume, when it is geographically impossible, and it has decreased from half to a quarter. It’s a really big change, and I dare say that everyone here, at least the majority of entrepreneurs, are still trying to hang on. There is a limit somewhere, everyone knows that it will not happen for a while, or for a long time, but people are trying to persevere even though there is not much light at the end of the tunnel.”

According to the participants, the negative and hopeless atmosphere in society, which is easily fuelled by the media, is mentally stressful. The flow of negative news, clickbait headlines and social media algorithms increase anxiety. This causes information overload, which weighs on people’s minds. However, global threats are not necessarily everyday topics of conversation but rather create dark clouds in the background. One person who meets many border residents in their work sums up the situation as follows:

“When visiting houses, people first talk about their own illnesses, village events, Finnish affairs, and finally the war, but they are not particularly concerned, as they are used to the border being there.”

The political polarisation of society is perceived as a threat to security. Although preparedness is seen as an important means of creating security, many discussions critically examine the militarisation of society, which no one seems to question anymore. Money is being taken away from social and health care, and that is a cause for concern.

“When resources are diverted to the army, NATO and protection from Russia, money and support are taken away from healthcare and those who need it most.”

“We talked about the media and how news is reported. This war mongering by politicians is absolutely appalling. When Häkkinen rants and raves, it makes me feel like I need to be on my guard.”

“I see a lot of polarisation in Finland. I understand the need for defence, even though I am a pacifist at heart. At the same time, I am constantly working to ensure that there is more than just militarism, which stems from fear.”

“I am concerned about the division and confrontation between people. Traditionally, war has always been needed to unite a nation, but is war needed again to restore a sense of community?”

In addition, the material revealed the same concerns as the sisu dialogue material. Loneliness and exclusion, especially among the elderly, are emphasised. In some areas, the sense of security is undermined by the visible use of intoxicants, gang activity and violent behaviour among young people. There is also concern about the living conditions and future prospects of young people. The increase in digital services has brought with it a fear of online scams, which makes it difficult for older people to manage their daily lives.

“Why is there so much loneliness? If you are physically fit, shouldn’t there be a place for everyone to socialise? Loneliness and mental health problems among young people have also spiralled out of control. Loneliness also has an impact on overall security: people are afraid to go out after dark, but loneliness can also lead to radicalisation and misanthropy.”

In the Sámi region, the sense of security and cultural continuity are challenged by disputes over land use, such as the ban on salmon fishing and hunting by non-locals, which is perceived as “reckless” and disrupts reindeer herding.



What brings a sense of security?

As in the sisu material, community spirit appears to be the most important means of strengthening the sense of security in this material as well. Village communities and neighbourhoods create a network where help is both given and received. Membership in various associations and, in small communities, cooperation and coordination between different actors in the area (associations, administration, entrepreneurs, private individuals, neighbourhoods, hobby groups) also strengthen people's safety nets. These formal and informal networks strengthen the vitality and crisis preparedness of the area and, through it, of society as a whole. Communities give people a sense of belonging, acceptance and usefulness in their own environment. Various cultural and sporting events and trips bring people together and bring joy to their everyday lives, which also promotes a sense of security.

“For me, communities create security. There should be a place where you can feel a sense of belonging, discuss things and... I have set out to develop that. I am involved in so many communities: my work community, organisations, family counselling centres in Rovaniemi and Kittilä. We provide help to people through these organisations. It gives me a sense of security when I see how people help each other.”

“Interaction between different companies, people and communities. The proximity of the border has not caused fear among residents. Strengthening the conditions for business and financing for new projects would create jobs and services to support local vitality.”

In many discussions, some of which also involved people with foreign backgrounds, the importance of integrating immigrants into local communities was highlighted. The Tammenlehvän perinneliitto association, which represents the voice of the veteran generation, compares the reception of today's immigrants to the reception of Karelian evacuees. They also suggest that they could develop a veteran tradition (community spirit) passport, in which good deeds, participation in various events and encounters could be recorded.

“To hear from local people about the problems; I know that I am not the only one, it is a general issue.”

“However, I know who my Finnish friends are, I know them, I don't know all of them, but they are all good people, and I feel safe with them.”

“Events celebrating different cultures and traditions strengthen diversity and mutual respect in society.”

Many discussions highlight the safety of small communities. Although the village is close to the border, it is still safer than nearby cities (such as Joensuu or Oulu) because there is a good community spirit and a sense of basic security in small communities.

“Living in Oulu has given me perspective. Things are good in Salla, and even though the border is close by, I feel much safer than I did in Oulu. I think this is specifically due to the community, which I feel is good in Salla.”

“In the south, you have to worry about stabbings and anti-theft alarms in shops. Not in Salla.”

“A small town is safer than a big one: it is easier to keep an eye on children, and children can go out and play together without worry.”

A negative social atmosphere is balanced by reassuring and reliable communication. It is important that people receive truthful and concrete information through the media. However, excessive reporting of threats can undermine confidence in the future. Young people and entrepreneurs in particular need prospects and hope for a better future.

“The Finnish media should also strengthen good journalism, not confrontation, i.e. no clickbait headlines, no extreme debates, but rather solution-oriented discussion.”

The participants also consciously considered what kind of reality they were creating with their own words. Negativity can also be a source of strength, as demonstrated by the annual vote for Finland’s worst village road organised by the Finnish Road Association and the Finnish Village Association.

“When you have an attitude that everything will be fine and dandy in the future, it is the opposite of hopelessness. I have tried to highlight this both personally and professionally. I have thought... I have four children and seven grandchildren in my family, so I have to keep hope alive for everyone.”

“I think that we need to be more conscious of what we say, especially from the perspective of hope and a bright future, how we talk about the future and things in general, especially among young people, what kind of picture we paint at, as it were, because it is really important and we should perhaps consciously practise it more.”

“Marketing pessimism through positivity, as exemplified by Finland’s most miserable village road.”

Trust in the media is linked to a sense of security that stems from strong confidence in the principles of the rule of law and in authorities such as the Border Guard and the Defence Forces. This way of thinking emerges in discussions among both native Finns and immigrants. The visibility of the authorities on the streets, such as the movement of Border Guard cars and helicopters, is often perceived as a reassuring factor.

“I have strong trust in the Finnish authorities and government. I am referring to the security of the country. In my opinion, the Defence Forces, the Border Guard, the Security Police and other police authorities operate in a highly professional manner. I also believe that cooperation between the authorities is effective and smooth. It is certainly being developed all the time, almost daily at some level.”

“Our security is enhanced by the fact that we have democracy, healthcare, a clean environment, a good school system, internal security, external security – the whole package.”

“When there is peace, and the police are our friends.”

“The rule of law and the constitution: you can trust that the law is the same for everyone.”

“Equal treatment creates trust and a sense of security.”

People also believe in the Finnish people's strong will to defend their country, and joining NATO has further strengthened confidence in National defence.

“Fortunately, we live in Finland, where security and defence matters have been handled very well, even though all this important work has been done without fanfare. Now, with the new law, security issues are of interest, and one realises how naive one has been in not understanding these security issues before. ”

“Joining NATO felt natural and logical, even though NATO is now a matter of everyday realism, but we must still strive for neutrality.”

“A: We are in NATO anyway, so there is no need to worry.

B: Finland protects us from the bad guys.

C: There's no need to be afraid. Finland and Sweden will protect us.

D: What came up when you talked about security or insecurity in Åland?”

In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine have raised people's awareness of what preparedness for crises means. Preparedness is carried out in households and local communities. Immigrants also appreciate preparedness training and information.

"When the war of aggression in Ukraine began, it occurred to me that I needed to think about preparedness. As the situation continues, my sense of security has not been shaken, but I am more alert, with my eyes open."

"Finland is probably one of the most prepared societies, but in recent years, preparedness has become more visible, for example, through the renovation and clearing of civil defence shelters, preparedness guides and plans."

"We have to think about more than just risks; we have to be prepared. We think about preparedness first. Everyone needs to know how to survive here, how geographical factors work here, because as immigrants we did not understand this country. Now we have up-to-date information, and we know about these things. In my opinion, safety and stability are the top priorities when considering these issues."

The following quote highlights the generational difference in preparedness.

"Are we talking about being prepared? Perhaps we are more of a consumer generation. The recession of the 1990s has influenced consumer behaviour. My age group does not focus much on being prepared. It would be advisable to be prepared, because our generation is the one that is capable and functional. I was born in 1990."

People in border areas consider it important for safety that the whole of Finland, and especially the border areas, remain inhabited and functional, for example by maintaining the road network. This is another way in which Finland can prepare for crises. People living in border areas also have valuable knowledge accumulated through history, which may be useful in the event of a border crisis. Culture also brings life to border areas and, through that, security. This is discussed, for example, in the dialogue organised by Lieksa's Vaskiviikot festival.

"It is particularly important to keep every region and "peninsula" inhabited, as this naturally strengthens community spirit."

"Society's operational readiness: the border region must remain inhabited."

"Vibrant Lieksa – surprises visitors."



In addition to preparedness, security is provided by not constantly following news about war and other global threats. People focus on things they can influence, their own well-being and that of their loved ones. Focusing on daily routines provides protection. Excessive worrying is pointless and only increases anxiety, which is of no benefit to anyone. Concrete activities, such as crafts or baking, create a sense of security, as does spending time in and enjoying the nature that surrounds the residents of the border region.

“Externalise world news, limit your media consumption and critically evaluate its content. Excessive consumption of war news and worrying about world events increases insecurity and anxiety.”

“When the war began, I followed it hour by hour, then day by day, but now I have become accustomed to it and even have to avoid following it in order to maintain my own well-being.”

Sisu on the border

Sisu is discussed in the Borderlands dialogues in much the same way as in the sisu dialogue material. Sisu is perseverance: things are continued systematically even when progress is slow or resources are tight. It is about taking responsibility on a daily basis, doing what needs to be done and not shirking from it. It is the ability to accept setbacks and turn them into victories without becoming discouraged at the first attempt. In the borderlands, sisu is also strongly linked to community spirit and historical heritage. It is not just an individual trait, but is presented as a way of strengthening the resilience of society as a whole in a changed security situation.

Sisu is seen as a tool for creating faith in the future and resisting hopelessness. Sisu involves an attitude of taking responsibility through action, rather than ‘lying down in the fire’ or ‘whining’ when circumstances change.

“As the municipality of Parikkala, I have been thinking about Imatra and, in fact, those places where hundreds or thousands of people from Russia used to go shopping every day. Parikkala did not really lose anything. We did not have much tourism income from it, but we have big dreams. Now we have a great border crossing point and paved roads and intersections that lead to the fence. Now we just need to get on with it, develop and move forward, and not get stuck in a rut where things don’t progress and don’t develop. Things will develop if we want them to; it’s a matter of sisu.”

Youth workers in particular describe sisu as essential for coping with the challenges posed by young people and constantly changing political decisions or government restrictions. However, this professional sisu requires time and hobbies to balance it out, so that workers can recharge their batteries. Sisu is also needed to vocally defend young people's rights and equality.

"Then, when whichever government decides to tighten things up a bit again, it undeniably requires sisu, and sometimes you think about throwing in the towel and letting someone else take care of it. Usually, youth workers are like us. We're a strange breed of people who curse about it for an hour and then roll up our sleeves and get on with it, but there has to be a limit somewhere, and you have to find the grit to do it anyway."

The participants in the borderland discussion also suggest that sisu should no longer be associated only with traditional individual 'heroic stories'. Instead, attention should be paid to the solidarity of the entire nation and the home front and how everyone – including women and children – had to stretch themselves and do their part.

"When talking about sisu, we should perhaps no longer refer exclusively to 'heroic stories' such as Simo Häyhä and the Raate Road, but rather highlight the importance of the unity of the entire nation and the lessons learned (everyone had to stretch themselves, the home front, women and even children, and will have to do so in the future if things go badly)."

Sisu also means that every citizen feels needed and accepted in sharing responsibility. A strong sense of one's own culture and identity is seen as a factor that gives people sisu. Eastern Finnish sisu is described as "easterners have thicker skin", which refers to the fact that borderland residents are accustomed to uncertainty and know how to remain calm.

"When we are strong in our own culture, it gives us sisu."

7. Conclusions

1. Sisu must not be used to justify the erosion of the welfare state

Perhaps the most critical message for decision-makers from the dialogues is that sisu is currently being used to cope with statutory services that should be civil rights. People with disabilities, older people and family carers in particular have to show unreasonable perseverance to get the support they are entitled to by law. Decision-makers must ensure that the concept of sisu does not become a tool of 'exhausting bureaucracy' that masks the shortcomings of the service system or leaves the most vulnerable to fend for themselves.

2. Transition from individualism to communal sisu

The traditional image of the lone sisu hero is outdated due to the risk of exhaustion and polarisation. Modern resilience is created through interaction and peer support; communal sisu grows when work communities, the third sector and neighbourhoods strengthen each other. The government should support structures that promote community spirit and the operating conditions of civil society organisations, as they are key builders of crisis resilience.

3. Soft sisu is modern and supports more sustainable well-being

Hard, aggressive pushing forward can lead to burnout. A wise person recognises their own limits, shows empathy and listens to different parties in an equal dialogue. Resilience is flexible endurance – the ability to gather strength and change direction when old methods no longer work.

4. The vitality of the eastern border is part of National security

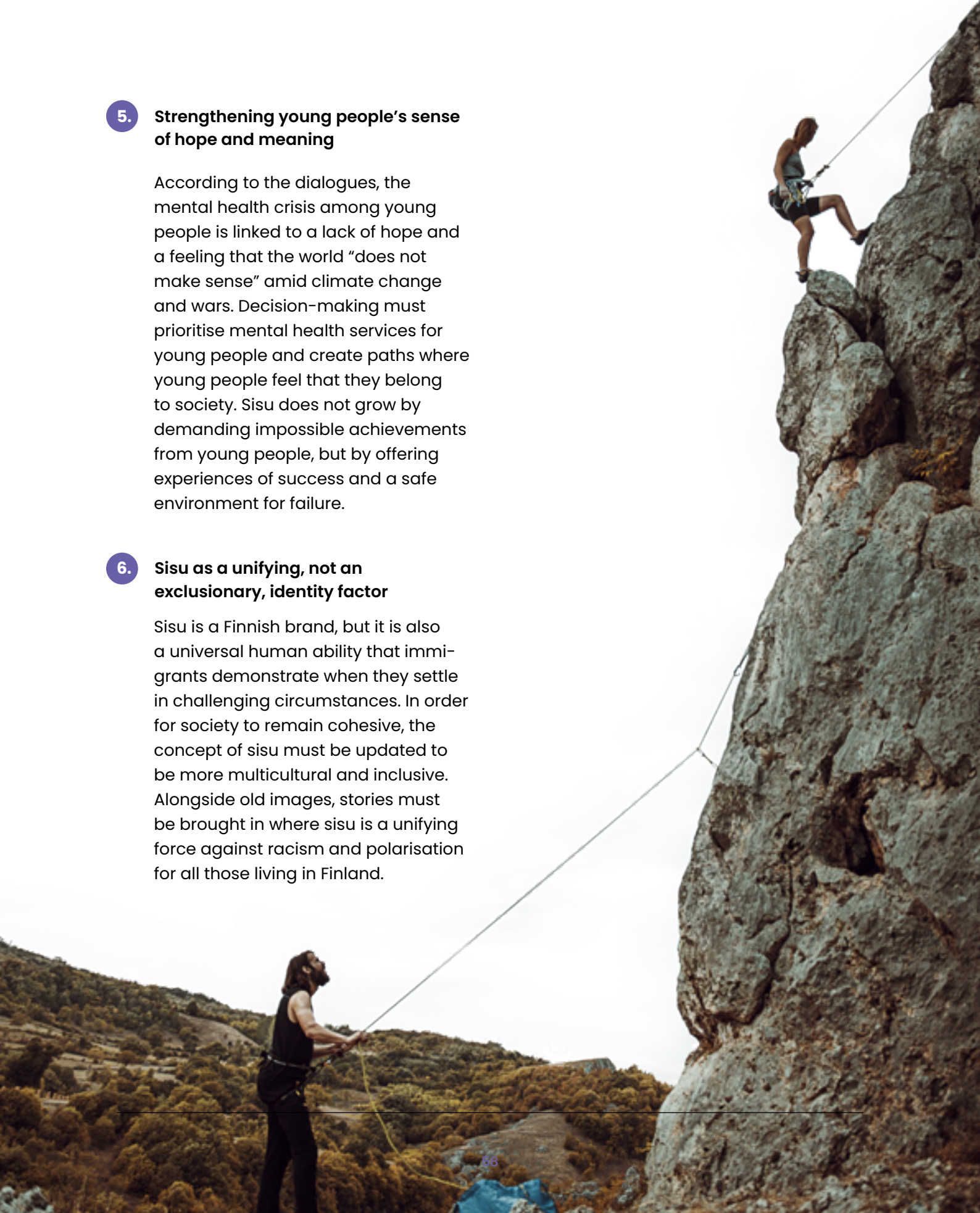
The Borderland dialogues show that the closure of the border and lack of investment are perceived in eastern Finland as a trend towards decline that erodes confidence in the leadership of the state administration. Keeping the border region populated and functional (e.g. roads and telecommunications connections) is not just a matter of regional policy, but also of strategic preparedness and security policy. Decision-makers must take into account that a sense of security comes not only from the strength of the armed forces, but also from the accessibility of everyday services and the economic prospects of the region.

5. Strengthening young people's sense of hope and meaning

According to the dialogues, the mental health crisis among young people is linked to a lack of hope and a feeling that the world “does not make sense” amid climate change and wars. Decision-making must prioritise mental health services for young people and create paths where young people feel that they belong to society. Sisu does not grow by demanding impossible achievements from young people, but by offering experiences of success and a safe environment for failure.

6. Sisu as a unifying, not an exclusionary, identity factor

Sisu is a Finnish brand, but it is also a universal human ability that immigrants demonstrate when they settle in challenging circumstances. In order for society to remain cohesive, the concept of sisu must be updated to be more multicultural and inclusive. Alongside old images, stories must be brought in where sisu is a unifying force against racism and polarisation for all those living in Finland.



Appendix: Previous National Dialogues

Spring 2025: Mental resources

Number of conversations: **117**

Number of participants: **1255**

The most important findings from the spring 2025 National Dialogues were eight theses for strengthening mental resources:

1. Talk wisely about mental health
2. Strengthen community spirit
3. Slow down
4. Make working life more humane
5. Secure services
6. Let's create cultural well-being
7. Build trust in the future
8. Support everyone's agency

Based on these theses, three comprehensive conclusions can be drawn:

1. People want a more humane society where everyone is seen, heard and valued for who they are, regardless of their individual performance or economic productivity. A humane society supports mental well-being by reducing loneliness and strengthening community spirit, providing security and inclusion, making room for diversity, and encouraging openness and creativity. A more humane society takes care of people in different life situations, develops preventive safety nets and services that support people in crisis, offers opportunities to influence one's own

everyday life and society, and promotes equality and non-discrimination in all areas of society.

2. Emotional skills also strengthen mental resources. Emotional skills refer to the ability to recognise, express and regulate one's own emotions and to encounter and acknowledge the emotions of others. The ability to encounter and deal with one's own and others' emotions creates a more humane and sustainable community life and, through this, valuable social trust capital. Emotional skills can be developed at the individual level and socially by investing in emotional skills training in education, training, working life and leadership.

3. In this day and age, mental resilience is also needed. Mental resilience is the ability of individuals and society to cope with challenges and adversity, learn from them and adapt to change. The mental resilience of individuals can be strengthened by encouraging action, enabling experiences of meaningfulness and creating hope. At the societal level, efforts can be made to prevent crises and provide accessible services, as well as to support associations, peer groups and cultural activities that promote well-being. A key part of mental resilience is social trust, which can be strengthened through public discourse that inspires confidence in the future and stories that encourage action.

Autumn 2024: What brings us together?

Number of conversations: **107**

Number of participants: **1222**

The most important findings and conclusions from the National Dialogues in autumn 2024 are:

- 1.** Many factors divide people: physical distances, the segregation of social circles and the associated economic inequality, changes in working life and digitalisation, as well as various practices that lead to bubbling, polarisation and discrimination. As divisions between people deepen, they can lead to negative cycles in which a lack of participation and trust further increases the distance between individuals and groups.
- 2.** The dialogues also shared numerous examples of the forms of cooperation that people find meaningful in their own lives and the ways in which they want to learn to understand each other better. Connecting factors included various places and spaces, such as youth centres, village halls, art, jogging trails and hobbies. In addition to places, practices and ways of working that build open and accessible communities, as well as a curious and caring attitude towards others, were also highlighted.
- 3.** In this day and age, active and conscious joint efforts are needed to bring people together and create a sense of community and belonging. Public administration can support these efforts by listening to and learning from citizens' experiences, providing meeting places and inviting citizens to tackle the challenges of our time. A clear message is needed that even in these challenging times, we have the opportunity to act and work together.

Spring 2024: Security and trust

Number of conversations: **111**

Number of participants: **1130**

The main conclusions of the spring 2024 National Dialogues are:

- 1.** Citizens' sense of insecurity has increased. This is particularly evident in weaker trust in society's safety nets and in the predictability of one's own life. Increased unpredictability and the perceived erosion of safety nets are narrowing the circle of trust for many people and placing individuals in unequal positions based on the amount of support and assistance available to them in their immediate circle.
- 2.** Insecurity and the uncertainty it creates are simultaneously shaking up many different areas of life: work and livelihoods, well-being and care, social cohesion, the significance and reliability of information, international relations and, ultimately, the conditions for life on our planet. Many of the negative changes seem permanent, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to believe that things will get better again at some point in the future. Facing an uncertain future becomes even more difficult if people are unable to trust each other and the resilience of society.
- 3.** Amidst increased insecurity, citizens have strong views on how to repair eroding trust and at the same time strengthen the sense of security. Trust can be built on many levels: by helping people take care of their own functional capacity, by creating community-building encounters, by strengthening citizen participation and better understanding of governance as a basis for decision-making, and by highlighting positive images of the future. It is important for decision-makers and the administration to note that citizens' experiences of security and insecurity in society are primarily influenced by the concrete circumstances of their everyday lives, the availability and functioning of public services, and the fairness of political decision-making.

Autumn 2023: Together and alone

Number of conversations: **68**

Number of participants: **650**

The main conclusions of the National Dialogues in autumn 2023 were:

- 1.** We are living in a time when digitalisation, hybrid work, various crises and the reorganisation of public services are affecting the way we interact with each other and function as communities. Alongside this, we are facing an increasing number of political and social challenges that are dividing people into camps. People felt that we have not taken sufficient care of our communities, with the result that many communities are at risk of disintegrating.
- 2.** The dialogues highlighted different stages of life in which anyone can experience difficulties in attaching themselves to new communities. At the same time, there is a noticeable permanent and accumulating loneliness among large groups of people. The more communities disintegrate, the harder it hits people living in the most vulnerable situations. The disintegration of communities also weakens the resilience of both individuals and society.
- 3.** We need a change in culture and thinking, where communities are given attention, invested in and consciously managed. Such a change requires community action, i.e. understanding, ability and willingness to build and manage communities. Public authorities and services can also play a stronger role than at present in supporting and enabling community spirit and in preparing fertile ground for citizens' voluntary community action.

Spring 2023: Living with uncertainty

Number of conversations: **86**

Number of participants: **660**

The most important findings from the National Dialogue in spring 2023 were as follows:

- 1.** The majority of citizens who participated in the discussions felt that uncertainty had increased in their lives. Uncertainty was felt to have increased in their own everyday lives, in society and globally.
 - 2.** Uncertainty was also caused by the perceived increase in social conflicts and the perceived strain on National unity.
 - 3.** Uncertainty affects people in different life situations in different ways. Uncertainty was particularly acute for people living in economically, socially or health-wise vulnerable situations.
 - 4.** As a result of increased uncertainty, many felt that their faith in the future had weakened. In particular, people were concerned about the future of children and young people, the erosion of the welfare state and its services, and global crises relating to the economy, wars, the state of democracy and the planet's carrying capacity.
- The most important factors that made it easier to live with uncertainty were community spirit, everyday wellbeing skills and acting in accordance with one's own values.



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