THE GENEVA CHALLENGE 2023

The International Contest for Graduate Students to Advance Development Goals

“The Challenges of Loneliness”

Last year, 279 teams composed of 1,065 graduate students from 64 countries took part in the 2022 Geneva Challenge. Building on this success, the Geneva Graduate Institute continues to encourage interdisciplinary problem-solving among graduate students from around the world. Thanks to the vision and support of Ambassador Jenö Staehelin, a long-standing partner and friend of the Geneva Graduate Institute, we are now proud to launch the 10th edition of the Geneva Challenge – Advancing Development Goals Contest – to address:

“The Challenges of Loneliness”.

A substantial proportion of people worldwide, from young adults to seniors, experience problematic levels of loneliness¹, including social, emotional and physical loneliness.² Loneliness impacts people’s physical and mental wellbeing, as well as their ability to fully participate in political, social and economic life. The experience of loneliness is prevalent in all parts of societies, among people from all socio-economic backgrounds, ages, and genders. Socially excluded and marginalised groups experience higher levels of loneliness, further exacerbating existing societal inequalities.³ For example, shocks, forced displacement, war, migration, and poverty all have profound links with loneliness and the negative effects of loneliness. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, shocks and crises can increase the number of people experiencing some form of loneliness, especially among vulnerable groups, but the issue is prevalent in all parts of the world and societies.

Furthermore, loneliness is linked to many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Therefore, addressing loneliness is crucial in order to achieve the SDGs.

To address this highly critical and complex issue, we invite graduate students from around the world to develop and present innovative and interdisciplinary solutions. Successful strategies today require being interdisciplinary and analysing the ways in which individuals, governments, civil society, international organisations and private sector organisations can and should respond. For this Geneva Challenge, we are seeking innovative and crosscutting proposals. The competition could not be more timely.

To aid participants, below are some details about specific pressing issues being experienced worldwide:

**Loneliness:**

Loneliness is “a situation experienced by the individual as one where there is an unpleasant or inadmissible lack of (quality of) certain relationships”. Or, in other words, it is the “perception of discrepancy between one’s desired and actual relationships” (p.63). Most often, loneliness is divided into emotional loneliness and social loneliness. Emotional loneliness is the lack of feeling emotionally connected to other people while social loneliness is the perceived lack of a larger social network. After the experience of physical distancing rules around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have proposed adding the concept of physical loneliness to describe the perceived lack of physical company of others. Further, loneliness is linked to an experience of isolation in a community, the feeling of being an outsider and perceived as being different. Importantly, social, individual and cultural differences around the world impact people’s understanding of loneliness and require specific methods of alleviation that match a society’s specificities.

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5 Landmann and Rohmann, “When Loneliness Dimensions Drift Apart.”
6 Landmann and Rohmann.
Around the world, problematic levels of loneliness are being experienced by a substantial proportion of the population. Yet there is only a limited amount of reliable data available. Scales to measure loneliness have limitations, including poor test-retest reliability and measurement invariance, and problems with how loneliness is conceptualised. Similarly, social desirability may lead to lower reported levels of loneliness since most measurements rely on self-reported loneliness. The data gap is particularly high in some regions. For example, no low-income countries and only five lower-middle-income countries have reported nationally representative data on loneliness in adults, limiting our insights into the situation in these countries. Additionally, data for all age groups except adolescents are lacking for non-European countries, meaning analyses are only available for European countries.

**Health & mental health:**

Loneliness has impacts on people’s mental and physical health. Recent research shows that loneliness increases the risk of mortality and negatively affects people’s life satisfaction. Existing evidence suggests that loneliness increases the risk of death from 26% to 45%, and increases the likelihood of developing coronary heart disease and stroke, high blood pressure, and dementia. Additionally, poor self-perceived health is seen to be an additional risk factor for loneliness, especially among older adults. Loneliness is also associated with depression, anxiety, psychosis, perceived stress, hopelessness, suicidality, fatigue and other mental health outcomes. Furthermore, mental health conditions may increase the likelihood of isolation and

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9 Surkalim et al., “The Prevalence of Loneliness across 113 Countries.”
12 Surkalim et al., “The Prevalence of Loneliness across 113 Countries.”
13 Surkalim et al.
19 John Cacioppo and Stephanie Cacioppo, “Older Adults Reporting Social Isolation or Loneliness Show Poorer Cognitive Function 4 Years Later,” *Evidence-Based Nursing* 17 (June 8, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1136/eb-2013-101379.
21 Mann et al., “Loneliness and the Onset of New Mental Health Problems in the General Population.”
Therefore, loneliness and mental health conditions have negative effects on each other, reinforcing the importance of understanding and tackling loneliness and mental health issues jointly.

**Material well-being, prosperity & employment:**

Having social connections is instrumental in our ability to share information, learn from others and seize economic opportunities. Poverty has been shown to increase the risk of loneliness and loneliness is higher among individuals from lower-income households. The rates of loneliness among people from more disadvantaged socio-economic status and with low levels of educational attainment are significantly higher than among more affluent people with higher educational degrees, suggesting an important link between socioeconomic factors and loneliness.

Feeling lonely has been associated with a higher likelihood of unemployment from 16% to 19%, thus being an important contributor to unemployment, which has increased in significance over time. Preventing or reducing loneliness may potentially decrease unemployment, which could positively effect a person’s economic situation and increase the population share contributing to the workforce. Viewed from a different perspective, unemployment has also been shown increase to feelings of loneliness.

**Vulnerable populations’s social exclusion:**

Loneliness is a pressing issue among deprived communities and within groups that are socially excluded in society or being discriminated against (for example people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and others).

**a. Forced Displacement, Migration & Refugees:**

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29 Morrish, Mujica-Mota, and Medina-Lara.
Direct exposure to war-related violence and loss, and stress related to their displacement negatively affects the mental health and feelings of loneliness among displaced persons. In addition, forced displacement due to other factors, for example, climate disasters or the destruction of housing, impacts people’s experiences of loneliness and isolation. Loneliness experienced by internally displaced persons is often exacerbated by the trauma of the events leading to their displacement and the stigma and exclusion resulting from the displacement. For example, the forced displacement of indigenous communities due to a climate-related disaster, has been shown to strongly effect their perception of loneliness because of their close ancestral ties to land and nature. Evidence suggests a higher proportion of perceived loneliness exists among indigenous people that were displaced from their lands, and this is related to the disruption of their social connectedness and the loss of their connection to cultural traditions.

Migrants and refugees experience higher levels of loneliness compared to host populations, with some studies suggesting that up to 73% of refugees and asylum seekers feel that their need for companionship is not being met. It has been shown that loneliness is relatively higher among refugee children, especially those exposed directly to the impacts of war, and among young individuals who flee alone. Further, the experience of displacement, flight, and resettlement contribute to people feeling lonely and hopeless. Migrants experience massive disruptions in their social networks and often encounter barriers in new countries. Additionally, even immigrants living in countries for a long time are prone to higher levels of loneliness, as has been

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40 Strijk, van Meijel, and Gamel, “Health and Social Needs of Traumatized Refugees and Asylum Seekers.”
shown for immigrant and refugee seniors.\textsuperscript{43} However, social support interventions have been shown to reduce the experience of loneliness among refugees, as long as they are culturally relevant to their respective backgrounds.\textsuperscript{44}

\subsection*{b. Age:\hfill}
Loneliness is generally higher among the elderly.\textsuperscript{45} Estimates show that around one-quarter of elderly people in high-income countries experience loneliness.\textsuperscript{46} Other studies have found even higher rates of loneliness among people of old age, with proportions ranging from 39\%\textsuperscript{47} up to 43\%.\textsuperscript{48} The percentage of people feeling lonely increases with advancing age.\textsuperscript{49} By 2050, one in six people in the world will be over the age of 65, by then making up 16\% of the world population.\textsuperscript{50} Loneliness is understood to increase the risk of several mental and physical illnesses that are already more prevalent among older adults, including higher rates of dementia, frailty, functional decline and death.\textsuperscript{51} Among the elderly, factors such as living alone, being female, being recently widowed, having a disability,\textsuperscript{52} living in rural areas, living in a residential home, having poor income and having low education\textsuperscript{53} are all associated with higher levels of loneliness. Thus, loneliness among seniors intersects with other factors of exclusion. Importantly, older adults report the lack of social contact with real friends and family members as contributing the most to their loneliness,\textsuperscript{54} as well as life changes such as the death of a spouse or moving residences.\textsuperscript{55} Common intervention themes to combat loneliness among older adults include face-to-face and digital

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\bibitem{51} Day, Laudermith, and Khathkate, “THE MOST TERRIBLE POVERTY.”
\bibitem{53} Savikko et al., “Predictors and Subjective Causes of Loneliness in an Aged Population.”
\bibitem{54} Wenger and Burholt, “Changes in Levels of Social Isolation and Loneliness among Older People in a Rural Area.”
\bibitem{55} Savikko et al., “Predictors and Subjective Causes of Loneliness in an Aged Population.”
\end{thebibliography}
connections that build skills and create new social connections, the improvement of infrastructure to make communities more age-friendly and policies to close the digital divide.\textsuperscript{56}

c. Youth, Education & Unemployment:

Since the pandemic, the question of loneliness among young adults has come to the forefront and it is becoming clear that they are among the groups most affected by loneliness and social isolation.\textsuperscript{57} Loneliness is high among young adults (<30 years)\textsuperscript{58} and school loneliness was already increasing before the pandemic around the world.\textsuperscript{59} Around one-third of young adults report problematic levels of loneliness.\textsuperscript{60} School loneliness is associated with lower life satisfaction and lower well-being among adolescents.\textsuperscript{61} Research suggests that loneliness is the highest among young adults, lowest among middle-aged people and then increases again with old age.\textsuperscript{62}

One reason for the high levels of loneliness among young adults is the high amount of significant life events (e.g., moving away from home or starting a new job…), which can trigger the feeling.\textsuperscript{63}

Young people not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) are particularly vulnerable economically, socially and in terms of their health. This phenomenon occurs when young people finish full-time education, but are not yet otherwise employed or engaged in training, a status that is often exacerbated by part-time jobs, short-term employment and personal factors such as child-caring duties.\textsuperscript{64} NEET youth, especially women\textsuperscript{65}, have a higher likelihood of experiencing loneliness, mostly because of the lack of social relations and friendships that would normally be created during education, employment or training.\textsuperscript{66}

d. Geographic Isolation, Rural Areas & Urbanisation:

\textsuperscript{56} “Social Isolation and Loneliness among Older People: Advocacy Brief” (World Health Organization, July 29, 2021).
\textsuperscript{61} Twenge et al., “Worldwide Increases in Adolescent Loneliness.”
\textsuperscript{62} Lippke and Warner, “Understanding and Overcoming Challenges in Times of Personal or Global Crisis—Editorial on the Special Issue on Loneliness and Health.”
\textsuperscript{63} Lim, “Loneliness Has Become a Global Epidemic among Young People Today.”
Living alone in urban areas increases the likelihood of experiencing loneliness, especially among older adults. By 2050, 66% of the world's population will live in urban areas. Living in overcrowded environments increases loneliness by up to 38%. This trend is particularly pronounced in the Global South, with urbanisation taking place far more rapidly. However, one billion urban people live in informal settlements, overcrowded environments and areas with little access to social and economic opportunities. Additionally, both in the Global South and the Global North, crowded urban areas give rise to conflicts and precarious living situations, such as higher exposure to pollution. Interestingly, green spaces in cities make people 28% less likely to feel lonely, suggesting this as one among the possible pathways for the mitigation of loneliness in urban areas.

While the experience of loneliness is often linked to large cities and urban centres, the experience of loneliness in small communities, rural areas and small villages can be more prevalent, especially among younger people. Smaller communities, while sometimes an important and helpful social network for people, can leave certain people to feel like outsiders, for example those with different values may experience particularly high levels of loneliness. Thus, remoteness can also affect people's experience of loneliness as it limits people's options of finding people they relate to and feel supported by. The likelihood of loneliness is particularly high among older adults living in remote areas far away from family members where the feeling of reduced mobility exacerbates the feeling of loneliness. Additionally, higher levels of loneliness have been reported in more deprived areas.

e. Gender, Race & Sexuality:

Gender is a marker of loneliness, although the percentages of people from certain genders reporting loneliness can vary across cultures, age and other factors. Women have greater odds

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72 “Urban Development.”
73 Mechelli, “People Feel Lonelier in Crowded Cities – but Green Spaces Can Help.”
75 Batsleer and Duggan.
76 Havens et al., “Social Isolation and Loneliness.”
of loneliness than men do, with higher rates of loneliness, depression and anxiety symptoms, especially prevalent among young females. The relationship between loneliness and depression is higher among females, suggesting that women are not only lonelier but also more likely to experience negative effects from loneliness. Further, single migrant mothers report higher rates of loneliness.

Any breakaway from established social norms, such as coming out as a member of the LGBTQAI+ community, can lead to social isolation, loneliness and the experience of being an outsider. This is particularly prevalent among more conservative and smaller communities. Individuals that identify as belonging to a sexual minority report higher ratings of loneliness than heterosexuals, a finding that is especially true for older LGBTQAI+ adults who are significantly more likely to be lonely. A likely cause for this is the lesser likelihood of living together with a partner and lower levels of family support.

Ethnic minorities and people experiencing discrimination and isolation because of their race show higher experiences of loneliness through this marginalisation. This factor is especially prevalent among communities with a very small proportion of a racial minority, which exacerbates their isolation within society.

f. Disability:

People with disabilities are at an increased risk of experiencing loneliness and social isolation. One study found that over 50% of people with disabilities experienced loneliness (compared to only 15% among non-disabled respondents). However, the experience of loneliness varies between different types of disabilities, with people with mental health issues (63%), some form of learning impairment (73%) or intellectual impairment (73%) experiencing higher rates of loneliness.
than people with physical and sensory impairments (50%) do. Young adults and children with disabilities experience loneliness through exclusion from regular schools and social activities due to their impairment. More generally, barriers for people with disabilities such as inaccessible communities, poorly resourced social care and the psychosocial emotional impact increase their experience of loneliness. Furthermore, people with disabilities are much more likely to be unemployed or experience a living situation that increases the likelihood of loneliness.

**Consequences of Shocks and Crises:**

In times of crisis, people experience higher levels of loneliness, as crises may exacerbate existing inequalities and increase levels of vulnerability and marginalisation. The crises that can affect the levels of loneliness include, but are not limited to, climate change, natural disasters, conflict, war, and economic and health crises.

**a. Conflict & War:**

The experience of armed conflict and war can influence a person’s feeling of loneliness, both among civilians and combatants. Higher levels of loneliness have been shown to lead to higher severity of PTSD symptoms. Children Born of War and female victims of human rights abuses during conflict all report higher feelings of loneliness. Among war veterans, loneliness and subjective physical health influence each other, showing how loneliness can both be increased by poor physical health and increase the subjective feeling of poor health. Therefore, decreasing loneliness among veterans could help their mental and physical health and positively affect their recovery. Furthermore, addressing the experiences of loneliness caused by war and conflict could help in larger efforts to rebuild communities and communal ties during post-conflict reconstruction.

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89 Macdonald et al.
90 Batsleer and Duggan, *Young and Lonely*.
91 Macdonald et al., “The Invisible Enemy.”
92 Macdonald et al.
93 Lippke and Warner, “Understanding and Overcoming Challenges in Times of Personal or Global Crisis—Editorial on the Special Issue on Loneliness and Health.”
95 Lippke and Warner, “Understanding and Overcoming Challenges in Times of Personal or Global Crisis—Editorial on the Special Issue on Loneliness and Health.”
b. Economic Crises:

It has been suggested that financial shocks can influence the rates of loneliness, for example by reducing people's ability to consume and participate in social activities.\textsuperscript{101} This effect is more prevalent among poorer households and people as they are more critically affected by financial shocks, such as inflation. Financial strain is associated with greater loneliness and financial strain is more pronounced in times of economic crisis. The number of unemployed people and higher federal government debt significantly affect people's psychological distress.\textsuperscript{103} Financial losses and negative income shocks increase the levels of loneliness, as experienced during times of recession.\textsuperscript{104}

c. Health Crises:

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the rates of loneliness in countries around the world due to physical distancing rules, increased stress and social isolation.\textsuperscript{105} The experience has shown how health crises can have a profound impact on how people experience loneliness\textsuperscript{106} and how social isolation rules lead to an increase in personal stress and loneliness.\textsuperscript{107} Already isolated and lonely groups and individuals,\textsuperscript{108} such as members of the LGBTQAI+ community\textsuperscript{109} felt the isolating impact of the pandemic most strongly. Similarly, the pandemic's negative effects were felt differently depending on marital status, migration background and employment status,\textsuperscript{110} and among young adults and women.\textsuperscript{111} Thus, health crises like pandemics can increase the experience of loneliness, especially among populations that are already more likely to experience

\textsuperscript{101} Kung, Kunz, and Shields, “Economic Aspects of Loneliness in Australia.”
\textsuperscript{102} Tehila Refaeli and Netta Achdut, “Financial Strain and Loneliness among Young Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Psychosocial Resources,” Sustainability 13, no. 12 (January 2021): 6942, https://doi.org/10.3390/su13126942.
\textsuperscript{108} Van Beek and Patulny.
\textsuperscript{109} Lippke and Warner, “Understanding and Overcoming Challenges in Times of Personal or Global Crisis—Editorial on the Special Issue on Loneliness and Health.”
loneliness and exclusion. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a global economic crisis leading to a dramatic increase in inequality within and across countries, impacting disadvantaged groups and countries with low-income the most. This way, a situation of multiple crises emerged, further impacting people’s experiences of exclusion, loneliness and uncertainty.

d. Natural Disaster & Climate Change:
In situations of disaster and shock, such as natural disasters, people experience an increased need for social support and higher levels of loneliness. The effect of natural disasters has been shown to lead to higher levels of mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide and anxiety. The effects of natural disasters, such as forced displacement and the destruction of one’s home, can lead to additional experiences of loneliness. Climate change influences loneliness in general as higher climate anxiety has been shown to increase the level of loneliness a person experiences. Reducing loneliness can also enable people to adapt to climate change.

Technology & Social Media:
What is the role (both positive and negative) of technology, social media and social networks when it comes to loneliness? While many technology-based solutions could help sustain social connections amid crises and over long distances, are the contacts are then more superficial and less meaningful? Research suggests that high-frequent use of social media could be associated with poorer mental and psychosocial health as well as higher rates of loneliness. However, these effects appear to differ between different age groups. Young people tend to experience social media in a more negative and isolating way, while among older adults social media use seems to reduce loneliness.

References:
113 Lippke and Warner, “Understanding and Overcoming Challenges in Times of Personal or Global Crisis—Editorial on the Special Issue on Loneliness and Health.”
115 Ballard, Coughlin, and Martin, “Reconciling with Minoaywin.”
117 Hrabok, Delorme, and Agyapong, “Threats to Mental Health and Well-Being Associated with Climate Change.”
118 Ortiz-Ospina and Roser, “Loneliness and Social Connections.”
Studies show that technology-based solutions, such as robots and computer agents, can help combat loneliness, particularly among Older People by enabling direct companionship and social interactions. Additionally, solutions like smart homes can help detect and predict loneliness and social isolation, and could therefore play a role in loneliness prevention and identification. However, current solutions provide mixed results, with some technology-based interventions leading to only limited results or even reversed impacts.

Additionally, access to technology-based solutions is unequal due to the global digital divide that leaves 2.9 billion people lacking access and abilities to make use of technologies and online offerings. This lack of access is much more pronounced among groups that are being excluded and marginalised within societies. For example, women in the Global South have significantly lower technology participation rates, and more generally, the digital divide is based on gender disparities. Additional factors that impact people’s access to digital resources and technology are education, income, and generational status, showing how the digital divide is most pronounced among those who are also more likely to experience loneliness.

Communities:
There is an increase in loneliness in cases where communities were destroyed or forcibly relocated, for example, due to a natural disaster. Thus, community relocation and dissolution can leave its members socially vulnerable unless relocation measures also take into account the communities’ cultural roots and foster community activities and resilience. Additionally, the forced relocation of community members, into public housing for example, is associated with a loss of social capital in such communities, showing how communal ties within deprived

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128 Morris, “Communicide.”
communities can be important sources of social capital, agency and change.\textsuperscript{130} Similarly, in areas that experience depopulation, communities are also said to experience a loss of social capital and resilience.\textsuperscript{131}

The maintenance and creation of strong social bonds and community belonging could help fight loneliness.\textsuperscript{132} with positive family interaction and general social support being shown to alleviate loneliness.\textsuperscript{133} Furthermore, community-based solutions for people with mental health issues experiencing loneliness have shown to be successful in alleviating loneliness.\textsuperscript{134} Additionally, culturally specific and community-based interventions against loneliness are shown to be more successful, for example among indigenous communities experiencing loneliness due to forced displacement where traditional procedures for healing and reconciliation helped reduce loneliness in the community.\textsuperscript{135} The experience of loneliness is closely linked to a person’s sense of belonging to a community or being positioned as an outsider.\textsuperscript{136} Thus, interventions and projects that are tailored towards those parts of a community perceived to be outsiders could be particularly helpful. For example, providing spaces where members of socially excluded communities could come together and connect with like-minded people was shown to help isolated and lonely young adults an opportunity to connect and build social bonds.\textsuperscript{137}


\textsuperscript{134} Bessaha et al., “A Systematic Review of Loneliness Interventions Among Non-Elderly Adults.”

\textsuperscript{135} Ballard, Coughlin, and Martin, “Reconciling with Minoaywin.”

\textsuperscript{136} Batsleer and Duggan, Young and Lonely.

\textsuperscript{137} Batsleer and Duggan.