

Opening streets for people

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Opening streets for people: Cities are responsible for rapid response measures and long-term recovery strategies for the post-COVID-19 world. This paper will look at successful measures and strategies in response to COVID-19, such as tactical urbanism projects (e.g., temporary bike lanes and street closures to vehicles), providing lessons learnt from innovative solutions for safe mobility.

Key messages

- Opening streets to people emerged in the 1970s¹ following Bogotá, Colombia's *ciclovía* model to transform urban public space and mobility
- Cities across the world are now applying this model to create cycling lanes and pedestrianized streets to overcome the pandemic² through safe urban movement and to promote economic regeneration
- A closer look:
 - India, Ethiopia and Mexico, inspired by the *ciclovía* tradition, have created their own open streets models: Raahgiri Day in India, Menged Le Sew in Ethiopia, and multiple forms in Mexico including *Vía RecreActiva*, *Muévete en Bici*, *Vía Recreativa Metropolitana*
 - Despite occupying the cities' majority, pedestrians and cyclists are often sidelined to the fringes in Indian and Ethiopian cities pursuing car-oriented development and lacking critical infrastructure to support non-motorized mobility
 - Emerging efforts on the ground, including the India Cycles4Change Challenge³ and Streets for People Challenge⁴, Ethiopia's Non-Motorized Transport Strategy⁵, and the rise of emergent *ciclovías* in Mexico⁶, highlight how streets for people can become a key element of each country's post-pandemic urban transport futures

Introduction

In the 1970s, the Colombian capital, Bogotá, pioneered a new approach to streets that put people before metal and steel. Taking the rebellious approach of reclaiming streets as public space for people, the *ciclovía* was born. Now nearing fifty years of dynamic urban life, Bogotá's *ciclovía* opens more than 120 kilometers of streets to people and closes them to motor vehicles, every single Sunday and public holiday.⁷ This movement, which goes by many names globally, from *ciclovías* to car free days to open streets, follows a simple yet transformative

concept: open streets to people to walk, run, skate and play by temporarily closing entire streets to motorized traffic. The momentum of the original *ciclovía* has inspired cities across the world, with hundreds of *ciclovías*, car free days and open streets programs, globally.

As of 2020, there are over 1,400 cities organizing open streets. The majority of events are being held in Europe as part of the European Mobility Week, followed by activities in Asia and Latin America:



Figure: Major cities with open street events⁸

The global pandemic has exposed the cracks in urban mobility systems, from the downfall of car-centric cities⁹ to the deadly combination of air pollution on COVID-19 outcomes.¹⁰ Tactical urbanism – meaning quick, low-cost, creative changes to the built environment to catalyze long-term change – in the form of pop-up cycling lanes and pedestrianized streets – has emerged across cities worldwide. This approach is being applied in all corners of the globe as a public health measure to reduce agglomerations of people on public transport systems and thereby minimize contagion of COVID-19, as well as encourage economic regeneration of businesses on reconverted streets, all the while reviving safe urban movement amidst the pandemic as a key element of urban recovery. Using paint, cones and DIY-traffic barriers, streets are being reshaped overnight, with active mobility as the centerpiece. From Berlin to Sydney and from Bogotá to Jakarta, pop-up cycling and pedestrian infrastructure are becoming staples of urban recovery from the pandemic.¹¹ The result is a burgeoning cycling boom – sparking bicycle shortages across the globe¹² from the unprecedented surge in demand – that is fundamentally reshaping streets.

Case study no. 1 | Raahgiri Day

The sustainable mobility boom is stretching to all corners of the globe. In India, the world's second-largest bicycle producer¹³, bicycle sales have nearly doubled¹⁴ throughout the pandemic, and cycling is surging as lockdown measures loosen.¹⁵ In fact, a recent survey by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) indicates that a 50-65 percent increase in cycling is predicted following lockdown measures in India.¹⁶

Beyond being a global bicycle manufacturing hub, India is the birthplace of Raahgiri Day, meaning movement to reclaim the streets. November 2013, in the city of Gurugram in Northern India, marked the kickoff of what has become a national car-free movement, inspired by the Colombian ciclovía model.

In a country of 1.3 billion people, only 2.7 percent of the population uses a private motor vehicle to commute, while more than 35 percent walks and cycles, according to India's latest census.¹⁷ Despite this, "cities have been so focused on car-oriented development,"¹⁸ remarks Sarika Panda Bhatt, Co-Founder of Raahgiri Day. As a result, more than half of all road traffic deaths are pedestrians and cyclists.¹⁹ Recent statistics translate this into 405 deaths and 1,290 injuries from traffic accidents every single day.²⁰

Raahgiri Day was born to demand safety for all road users, create space for community connection and allow people to take back their streets. The initial launch in Gurugram saw the participation of 10,000 residents reclaim the streets for active movement free of motor vehicles. But this was only the beginning. The flourishing weekly car free campaign has spread to more than 70 cities and 22 states across India, with the participation of millions. Raahgiri Day has even inspired collective behavior change, with research indicating a 30 percent increase in bicycle purchases by open streets participants.²¹



Raahgiri Day in Delhi, India. Photo: Raahgiri Foundation

While Raahgiri Day is currently on hold because of the pandemic, innovative challenges are emerging to push for transformative city and transport planning that accelerates the

participatory implementation of pedestrian and cycling infrastructure and fundamentally reshapes India's post-pandemic cities.

July 2020 saw the launch of the India Cycles4Change Challenge, “a national level initiative to inspire and support the cities to quickly implement cycling-friendly initiatives in response to COVID-19.”²² The initiative, introduced by the Smart Cities Mission of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, puts alternative sustainable mobility at the center of India's post-pandemic recovery. The challenge invites a range of active transportation proposals including pop-up cycling lanes, slow zones, bicycle-sharing systems, subsidized bicycle maintenance, community engagement, education and outreach campaigns to promote cycling.

The first stage, running until October 2020, welcomed pilot interventions and conceptual planning for scaling, while the second stage, taking place from October 2020 to May 2021, will allow shortlisted cities to scale their pilot interventions. With support from the ITDP, digital workshops between experts and cities looking to pioneer cycling infrastructure and initiatives will take place to collectively brainstorm, share knowledge and global case studies, and implement the proposals on the ground.

In September 2020, this same ministry launched the Streets for People Challenge, “to inspire cities to create walking-friendly streets through quick measures, in response to COVID-19.”²³ Placemaking and livability are at the core of this agenda, which invites cities to propose flagship initiatives that transform streets as public spaces to catalyze economic regeneration, child-friendly approaches, and a green urban recovery. These can include interventions such as the pedestrianization of streets and the use of tactical urbanism to repurpose street parking into pop-up parks, for example, that can be tested at low-cost and then further scaled to the city level. The ministry hopes that in the longer term, these temporary interventions of streets for people can become permanent.

Indian cities can look to Pune, India for inspiration as it was the winner of the Sustainable Transport Award 2020. The city has been selected for growing pedestrian and cycling infrastructure, retrofitting footpaths to priorities pedestrians, and amplifying public transport systems. These interventions include a fleet of electric buses, an extensive bicycle sharing program, expansion of bus rapid transit (BRT), and a 50 percent transport budget allocation for sustainable transport modes including walking, cycling and public transport infrastructure.²⁴

Case study no. 2 | Menged Le Sew



Menged Le Sew in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Photo: Nafkot Gebeyehu/Menged Le Sew

Movement in Ethiopian cities and rural centers is dominated by walking, cycling, collective and public transport.²⁵ In Addis Ababa, more than 85 percent of residents rely on active mobility and collective transit to move around the capital city.²⁶ Cycling dominates the country's smaller towns and secondary cities, such as Bahir Dar and Hawassa, where cycling makes up 90 percent and 88 percent of commutes, respectively.²⁷

Despite this overwhelming majority dependent on sustainable mobility, transport planning in Ethiopia has been car-centric, putting non-motorized transport systems on the backburner of urban mobility planning. As a result, Ethiopian cities are critically lacking in adequate walkways and protected cycling infrastructure to accelerate low-carbon mobility.²⁸

The collateral damage of such transport planning are 13 road traffic deaths and 37 road traffic injuries per day across the country, according to the latest Addis Ababa Annual Road Safety Report.²⁹ The vast majority of these traffic deaths and injuries are pedestrians, accounting for 84 percent and 67 percent, respectively. Trends in negative public health outcomes have followed suit, triggered by increasing air pollution levels, generated in part by vehicle emissions.

To change this reality, Menged Le Sew – meaning Streets for People – emerged in December 2018, through a fusion of government ministries, city offices, civil society organizations and

research institutes, to create a different trajectory for urban mobility in Ethiopia. This alternative vision is one that moves from transport planning for the car-centric minority to planning for the sustainable mobility majority. Collective behavior change, community engagement and policy advocacy are key elements of this push for transformational change in Ethiopia's mobility systems.³⁰

Through monthly open streets programming that draws thousands of participants, Menged Le Sew is grounded in a vision of safe streets, ecological sustainability, active living and social connection. The movement originally kicked off in Addis Ababa and has spread to cities across the country including Bahir Dar, Jimma and Mekelle, with support from the Ministry of Transport. In fact, the March 2020 edition was set to take place in all of Ethiopia's regions, and was only stalled by the pandemic.

Despite this interruption, significant progress is underway. World Bicycle Day – June 3, 2020 – marked the launch of Ethiopia's Non-Motorized Transport Strategy to transform the country's transport planning to priorities non-motorized mobility. The strategy harnesses diverse elements of non-motorized transportation including pedestrian, cycling and greenway networks; intersection and lighting improvements; and bicycle sharing and rental schemes. Between the national and capital city non-motorized transportation strategies, more than 1,000 kilometers of pedestrian infrastructure and 500 kilometers of cycling lanes are set to be constructed by the end of the decade.

To continue with outreach and campaigning amidst the pandemic, Menged Le Sew co-produced the World Car Free Day Summit 2020³¹ with London Car Free Day, as part of a global mobilization pushing for streets and cities for people. H.E. Dagmawit Moges, Ethiopia's Transport Minister, delivered the keynote address for the World Car Free Day Summit, presenting Ethiopia's vision of creating equitable, accessible cities for all, and highlighting Menged Le Sew as a vital element of this vision.³² A collaborative toolkit is currently being finalized to replicate Menged Le Sew in all Ethiopian cities and beyond.

In September 2020, as part of Menged Le Sew, the Ministry of Transport began organizing monthly bicycle rides to promote physically distanced active mobility even during the pandemic. In October 2020, Menged Le Sew participated in African Mobility Month: Re-Imagining the Future of Mobility in African Cities, in the session *A vision for post-pandemic mobility in African cities*, to collectively explore pathways to put streets for people at the center of urban recovery.

Case study no. 3 | Mexico's emergent ciclovías

Mexico has seen a massive conversion of public streets from motorized transport to emergent infrastructure for active mobility throughout the pandemic. "This didn't start with coronavirus," remarks Areli Carreón, Bicycle Mayor of Mexico City and Founding Member of Bicitekas, "we are harvesting what we've been building over more than two decades."³³ She refers to the tireless collective action and civil society campaigning for active and sustainable mobility and cities for people that has marked the past decades in Mexico.

Such campaigning of streets for people has taken place against the backdrop of Mexico's accelerating urbanization. Between 1950 and 2010, the urbanization rate rose from 43 percent

to 78 percent³⁴, and more recently, between 1990 and 2010, 23 million new inhabitants populated Mexico's 100 largest urban areas, often in the peripheries of cities.³⁵ In these areas, public transport (including minibuses, metro systems, bus rapid transit, light rail transit, buses, cable cars and trains) dominates the bulk of urban movement at 49 percent, followed by private vehicles at 28 percent, and the remaining 23 percent by walking and cycling.³⁶ The capital city tells a somewhat different story, where around 45 percent of metropolitan Mexico City moves in public transport, 32 percent rely on walking as their exclusive form of transport, more than 2 percent cycle, and around 21 percent use private vehicles.³⁷

In 2004, Guadalajara, Mexico's second largest city, launched the country's first *Vía RecreActiva* – the equivalent of open streets or car free streets. Through its growing evolution, Guadalajara's *Vía RecreActiva* now opens more than 60 kilometers of arterial roads to people to experience all forms of active mobility every single Sunday.³⁸ In 2007, Mexico City – in essence a country inside a city, with a staggering metropolitan population of 21 million inhabitants – followed suit, dubbing their open streets movement *Muévete en Bici*, with a total of 55 kilometers of car free streets every Sunday.³⁹ The concept has reached many corners of Mexico, such as the *Vía Recreativa Metropolitana*, which stretches through nearly 15 kilometers of car free streets across three municipalities of Puebla, Mexico every month.

Opening streets for people is essential to address pressing urban challenges and improve health outcomes that could otherwise aggravate the pandemic. These interventions are critical for active livelihoods in a country where the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the adult population is more than 70 percent.⁴⁰ Air pollution claims more than 48,000 lives prematurely every year⁴¹ and is the ninth leading cause of illness and death in Mexico.⁴² Traffic accidents represent the second highest cause of death of children from 5-9 years, and young people ages 20-39, while these vehicle accidents are the leading cause of physical disability of youth between 17-24 years.⁴³

While reclaiming streets for people mitigates these urban threats, Mexico's multiple forms of open streets, from *Vía RecreActiva* to *Muévete En Bici* to *Vía Recreativa Metropolitana*, have been suspended during the pandemic to limit mass gatherings. Instead emergent *ciclovías*, meaning in this case different forms of cycling lanes and active mobility infrastructure, are popping up across Mexico, to relieve

the overburdened public transport systems and allow for safe urban movement. This response in active planning follows growing demands for cycling infrastructure to ease public transit demand and move essential workers, as well as improve health outcomes and encourage active mobility. These include a proposal from the Bicycle Mayor's Office in Mexico City for 131 kilometers of bicycle lanes⁴⁴, as well as an open letter to the President of Mexico from nearly 50 bicycle advocacy organizations⁴⁵ to facilitate the provision of this critical active mobility infrastructure across the country.



These emergent *ciclovías* are now reshaping prominent streets across Mexico. Avenida Insurgentes, the longest continuous street in Mexico City, witnessed 40 kilometers of emergent

ciclovías overnight, and has seen a 250 percent usage increase to more than 7,000 daily users during the pandemic.⁴⁶ “This was a symbolic conquest,”⁴⁷ remarks Giovanni Zayas, Co-Founder of Via Recreativa Metropolitana in Puebla. “If you can conquer Insurgentes, you can conquer any street.”⁴⁸ The pandemic is accelerating the implementation of cycling infrastructure, with streets opening to people in the form of emergent ciclovías in Aguascalientes, Guadalajara, León, Mexico City, Puebla, San Luis Potosí, San Pedro Garza, Zacatecas and Zapopan.⁴⁹ The Mobility Secretariat of the Government of Mexico has published guidelines for the implementation of emergent ciclovías across the country.⁵⁰

The emergent ciclovías are now encompassed within a brand-new mobility plan for a new normal. This plan, a collaborative project among bicycle activists, government officials, civil society organizations, transport experts, residents and policy organizations, is known as Movilidad 4s para México⁵¹ or 4s Mobility for Mexico. The strategy proposes mobility systems rooted in four key elements: health, safety, sustainability and solidarity, and are supported by measurable strategies and actions.

As Mexico moves through the pandemic, active mobility advocates and collectives are calling for the emergent ciclovías to become permanent⁵², as a strategy that not only facilitates physically distanced travel, but one that improves air quality⁵³ and health outcomes, limits vehicle emissions and puts active mobility at the forefront of urban regeneration.

Conclusion

The pandemic is fundamentally reshaping streets, providing a critical moment to rethink urban mobility systems and move beyond car-dominant models to design streets for people. As pop-up non-motorized infrastructure carves out new urban realities, it exposes the transformative power of opening streets to people, not only to improve health outcomes and democratize public space for the use of the majority: pedestrians, cyclists and public transit users, but also to power economic regeneration as businesses take to the streets. Following the traditions and inspirations of open streets movements, experiences from India, Ethiopia and Mexico highlight how infrastructure for active mobility and progressive non-motorized transport policies can allow for cities that are decidedly different. These future realities, being piloted as elements of urban recovery, put people at the center of streets and transport planning to radically transform post-pandemic cities.

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