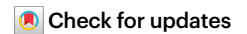


# Dreaming a better urban future with Open Streets: ideas from three African cities

Marcela Guerrero Casas & Dustin Kramer



Born in Colombia 50 years ago, a simple concept is providing the ground for new experiments in cities of the Global South.

In Bogotá, Colombia, a group of young professionals had a simple, yet revolutionary idea. Hoping to create safe routes for bicycles, in 1974 they asked the mayor to shut down five kilometres of one of the main arteries of the city, and thus, Ciclovía was born<sup>1</sup>. The concept is simple: create temporary road closures to give residents the opportunity to run, cycle, walk or simply make use of streets differently and safely.

Over the past five decades, most Latin American capital cities developed a weekly Ciclovía programme<sup>2</sup>. In the early 2000s, under the banner of ‘Open Streets’, the idea spread to North America and India. Several cities in Africa followed suit, and in 2018, representatives from more than a dozen cities convened in Cape Town to share ideas in the Open Streets Exchange for African Cities<sup>3</sup>.

However, despite its clear benefits in promoting sustainable mobility (by enabling and encouraging walking and cycling, improving air quality and enhancing urban inclusivity<sup>4</sup>), closing streets to traffic is no easy feat. This is compounded by the dominance of car-centric urban design, planning and management.

Three African cities – Addis Ababa, KwaDukuza and Cape Town – show how creating temporary car-free spaces is taking place in distinctive forms, driven by the needs and imaginations of their governments and residents. The experiences of these cities point to three ideas that could help move us into the next 50 years of Ciclovía: adapting public space regulations, enabling international exchange and embracing flexibility. Developing Open Streets in this way not only helps to collectively build resilient neighbourhoods and streets, but also highlights new opportunities and generates new ideas for the future of our cities. As Fig. 1 shows, streets can be radically transformed from their normal state of traffic congestion and pollution.

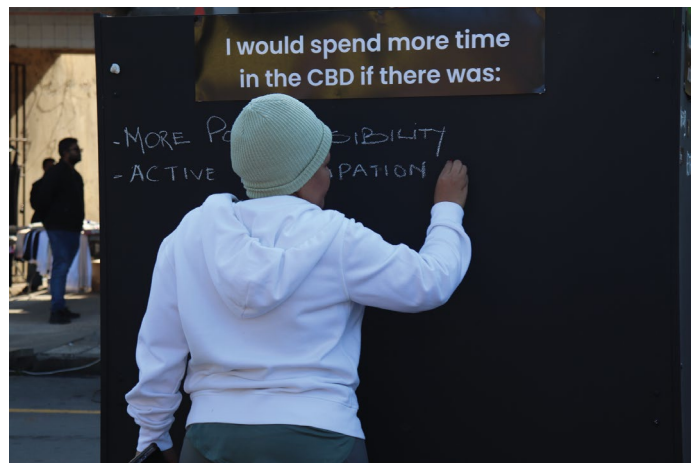
## Mobility and transport in Addis Ababa

Following the 2018 Open Streets Exchange for African Cities, the head of Addis Ababa’s Traffic Management Agency joined with an activist and started Menged Le Sew, the first Open Streets programme in Ethiopia’s capital city<sup>5</sup>. Menged Le Sew (translated from Amharic as ‘streets for the people’) is probably the most similar programme on the African continent to the Ciclovía model. It has been regularly implemented on Ethiopia’s streets and holds an emphasis on mobility and cycling. Unlike Bogotá however, Addis Ababa adopted a more dispersed model; and today, 23 streets of different lengths across the city are closed weekly or monthly.

The programme has attracted local and international support. Jiregna Hirpa, a Transport Planner from the World Resources Institute, was the head of the Traffic Management Agency when the programme started. He notes that he, “saw the potential for Open Streets to support



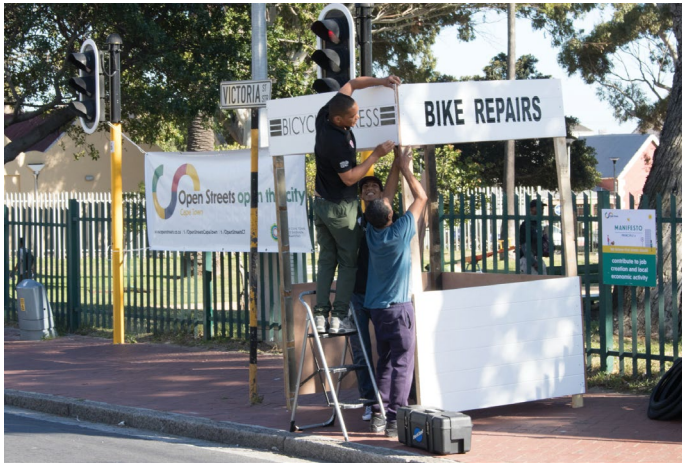
**Fig. 1 | Open Streets in Cape Town.** One of the main arteries of Cape Town transformed for a day as part of the Open Streets programme in 2018.



**Fig. 2 | ‘Ideas box’ in KwaDukuza.** Residents of KwaDukuza were invited to share their feedback about the municipality’s regeneration plans for the Central Business District (CBD) on large ‘ideas boxes’ at the 2023 Open Streets festival.

sustainable mobility in Addis Ababa. It is encouraging to see how city officials have adopted it and taken it to the next level” (Jiregna Hirpa, 2023, personal communication).

The programme has also gained the financial and technical support of the World Resources Institute<sup>6</sup> and has enabled offshoot initiatives, such as a bicycle school for girls called ‘Cycle Techyalesh’ that was initiated by local NGOs. Menged Le Sew in Addis Ababa is quickly becoming a reference in the continent, as demonstrated by the holding



**Fig. 3 | Pop-up bicycle shop in Cape Town.** Open Streets can create opportunities for small and emerging businesses.



**Fig. 4 | Ciclovía in Bogotá.** Delegates from East African and Latin American cities cycle on Bogotá's Ciclovía as part of a low-carbon mobility exchange programme.

of a recent convening, where officials from Accra, Ghana, travelled to Addis Ababa to learn from the programme with aims of implementing the programme in their own cities<sup>7</sup>.

## Environment and public engagement in KwaDukuza

A city official in KwaDukuza – a small city on the east coast of South Africa – introduced the same idea in 2019, and since then city has hosted an annual 'Open Streets festival' to commemorate World Environment Day.

In 2023, the municipality used their Open Streets festival for public engagement, showcasing their plans for infrastructure improvements in the city centre<sup>8</sup>. The idea was to model the type of car-free infrastructure that would support a climate-sensitive city. A sample of benches, streetlights, plants and surfaces were displayed, and residents were invited to share their ideas and suggestions on large 'ideas boxes', as shown in Fig. 2. In this way, Open Streets enabled the public

to interactively learn about government plans – a far cry from more conventional public engagement formats.

Siyabonga Khanyile, the Executive Director for Community Services and Public Amenities at the KwaDukuza Municipality explained that, "creating a car-free space in the city centre was a powerful way to showcase a more pedestrian-friendly future for KwaDukuza and to encourage a sense of ownership and pride amongst residents" (Siyabonga Khanyile, 2023, personal communication). Indeed, with 500 m of car-free road, children cycled and skateboarded while local vendors and organizations exhibited. City officials, excited about the festival, found ways to highlight their own programmes. The environmental team, for example, organized a walk led by children to raise awareness about water use.

## Local economic development in Cape Town

A resident-led initiative introduced the idea of temporary road closures in Cape Town in 2012; it was then adopted and supported by local government in different forms. The early days galvanised a strong spirit of volunteerism inspired by the sense of social cohesion that Open Streets created<sup>9</sup>. Individuals and organizations undertook the effort and covered the expenses involved in travelling to different parts of the city to be part of something that was unifying. This was powerful in a city still battling with a legacy of urban segregation resulting from the country's apartheid past. It was also an opportunity for small local businesses to get some exposure, as depicted in Fig. 3.

In 2020, the concept shifted from a series of Open Streets days to ad hoc street closures, largely with an emphasis on economic development. As part of its COVID-19 recovery strategy, the Mayor's office sponsored the creation of temporary car-free streets to support local businesses; restaurants, for example, could trade on such streets.

As Cape Town's Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis points out, "streets that are pedestrian friendly and accessible to all can be an asset. In Cape Town, we have used the concept of Open Streets to maximise the opportunity they offer for local economic development and to build a sense of community" (Geordin Hill-Lewis, 2023, personal communication).

## Three ideas for the next 50 years

Faced with complex urban challenges, cities look to each other for ideas and solutions. Policy makers, practitioners and urban residents alike can learn from the simple concept of car-free streets or Open Streets. The respite from bad air quality, noise and road crashes is certainly an excellent reason to do it, particularly for other cities in the Global South experiencing similar challenges. Through learning from how African cities are adapting the concept of Open Streets to suit their cities, we can identify three different adaptations that could help us implement Open Streets in other cities over the next 50 years.

### Adapt regulations to enable use of streets as genuine public space.

If a city like Bogotá, with significant traffic problems by global standards<sup>10</sup>, is able to create an entire car-free network, the logic follows that other cities have the ability to do the same. Cities like Mexico City and New Delhi have adopted similar programmes, where key arteries of the city, normally filled with traffic, become car-free on a regular basis.

Nevertheless, each city has different regulatory contexts that may determine the level of difficulty involved and expense required in 'opening' their streets. There is no new technology required, rather the innovation is finding ways to either work within existing regulations or to change them to reduce obstructions.

This may include, for instance, finding ways to reduce temporary infrastructure such as steel barriers and other materials, re-evaluating



**Fig. 5 | Activities at an Open Streets day in Cape Town.** With appropriate regulations and community engagement, streets can become genuine public space that adopt multiple purposes.

public liability to acknowledge the increased safety of removing vehicles and creating opportunities for private sector contributions to provide the financial or in-kind support needed to start and run Open Streets programmes.

**Enable and use the international exchange of practices.** By seeing what is possible in similar contexts, government officials and private actors can be empowered to experiment in their cities more freely. This is particularly important in the Global South, where resources are more limited and cities face competing challenges<sup>11</sup>.

Seeing what cities of the Global South are already doing to maximise existing assets can spark ideas about the practicalities of road closures. Indeed, cities can use different models of barriers, public liability and private sector contributions. The wealth of knowledge that cities with experience hold is not accessible through a book or a generic training programme. Information is indeed best transferred through first-hand experience, as shown in Fig. 4.

Exchange of lessons and ideas about programmes and policies among cities of the Global South expands the potential for knowledge creation and replicable innovation across comparable contexts.

**Embrace flexibility.** Since replicating a programme with a high degree of ‘human infrastructure’ is not a mathematical exercise, the

results may seem imperfect. In reality, what comes up in different contexts enables learning and fosters innovation. From environmental awareness and mobility to local economic development, Open Streets in KwaDukuza, Addis Ababa and Cape Town ended up being very different.

When streets become car-free, people don’t just go out to cycle or exercise, but to experience the city anew. Residents create memories and stories that shape their lives and their cities. They use the space in ways hitherto thought impossible (Fig. 5). The adaptation of the simple idea of Open Streets in Addis Ababa, KwaDukuza and Cape Town points to the shifts needed in regulating public space regulation, promoting international exchange and seeing the potential in what sometimes looks like imperfections. Doing so may be a small, but important, step to achieving the cities that we collectively want and need.

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## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.