

Cycling Activism in Mexico: From Confrontational Action to Institutional Advocacy

Cicloactivismo en México: De la acción confrontativa a la incidencia institucional

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Abstract: This article examines the evolution of cycling activism in Mexico, highlighting its transition from protest to institutional advocacy. Based on 60 semi-structured interviews and 484 surveys conducted with cycling activists across 30 states, it analyzes their motivations, demands, and strategies. Drawing on Cox's (2019) typology of change models, the study identifies various forms of action, ranging from direct interventions and lobbying to collaboration with international organizations. The results indicate that, despite diverse strategies—including protests, participation in public office, and project management—the movement maintains a shared vision of the city, with road safety and the right to mobility as central demands, as revealed by the multivariate analysis. The findings show that the strategic combination of protest tactics and institutional participation mechanisms has been key to legitimizing cycling activists' demands and strengthening their impact on the public agenda. **Keywords:** cycling activism, urban mobility, bicycle, urban social movements, Mexico

Resumen: Este artículo examina la evolución del cicloactivismo en México, destacando su transición de la protesta a la incidencia institucional. A partir de 60 entrevistas semiestructuradas y 484 cuestionarios aplicados a cicloactivistas de 30 estados, se analizan sus motivaciones, demandas y estrategias. Con base en la tipología de modelos de cambio de Cox (2019), se identifican diversas formas de acción, desde intervenciones directas y cabildeo hasta la colaboración con organismos internacionales. Los resultados indican que, pese a la diversidad de estrategias—protestas, participación en cargos públicos y gestión de proyectos—, el

movimiento mantiene una visión compartida de la ciudad, con la seguridad vial y el derecho a la movilidad como demandas centrales, según el análisis multivariante. Los hallazgos muestran que la combinación estratégica de tácticas de protesta y mecanismos de participación institucional ha sido clave para legitimar las demandas del cicloactivismo y fortalecer su impacto en la agenda pública.

Palabras clave: cicloactivismo, movilidad urbana, bicicleta, movimientos sociales urbanos, México.

Introduction¹

The car-centric urban development model, termed the “automobile system” by Urry (2004), has profoundly impacted the spatial configuration of contemporary cities. This system is sustained by various measures and policies, such as gasoline subsidies, building regulations that require parking, road construction, and urban development with land-use patterns that favor automobile use (González-Arellano, 2013). This system negatively affects those who do not travel by car, limiting and hindering their access to services, facilities, urban areas, and daily life activities (Jirón and Mansilla, 2014). Highways, expressways, elevated roads, bridges, and other infrastructure fragment space and restrict the mobility of a large segment of the population, including cyclists, putting their safety and physical well-being at risk (Li *et al.*, 2020). Cities that prioritize motorized mobility tend to have high accident rates, while those that promote the development of cycling infrastructure are generally safer for all their inhabitants (Marshall and Ferenchak, 2019).

The “automobile system”, characterized by policies and infrastructure that prioritize car use, contrasts with the concept of “velomobility”, which is understood as a comprehensive system proposing a profound change in how we think about, design, and build cities (Cox, 2019). This alternative model seeks to address urban problems arising from widespread automobile use, such as environmental pollution and traffic congestion. In Mexico, cycling

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activism goes beyond merely promoting bicycle use as a mode of transportation; its central objective is to drive the transition to a “velomobility” system through various actions that challenge and aim to transform the current urban model.

Despite the extensive development of research on social movements in Latin America in recent decades, most studies have focused on peasant, guerrilla, human rights, and indigenous movements, as well as struggles for democracy and against the capitalist economic model (Inclán, 2018; Murga Frassinetti, 2006). In contrast, urban social movements have received less attention. Although studies on the defense of the right to housing and water stand out (Ramírez Saíz, 1984; Luna Nemecio, 2021), these are the most frequently addressed topics, but not the only ones.

Only in recent years has research on activist movements for the right to mobility, particularly cycling activism, begun to emerge. These movements have generated growing interest, especially in countries of the Global North (Cox, 2023 and 2024; Soliz, 2021; Balkmar and Summerton, 2017; Aldred, 2012; Batterbury, 2003) and, more recently, in Latin American countries such as Chile (Gillot and Rérat, 2024; Sagaris and Arora, 2017; Sagaris, 2014), Colombia (Castañeda and Moscoso, 2022; Castañeda, 2020), Peru (Pasapera, 2024), and Brazil (Lemos, 2020). This emerging field offers new perspectives for analyzing the organizational forms, demands, and social impact of cycling activism movements in cities of the Global South, which are marked by deep socio-spatial inequalities.

In Mexico, the study of urban activism, especially cycling activism, has also gained relevance in recent years. Chérubin (2019) examines, through political sociology and interviews with key actors, how cycling activism gradually positioned sustainable mobility on the political agenda from a peripheral position. He also explores the “unlikely convergence” between upper-middle-class cycling activists and popular micro-entrepreneurs of concessioned transport (“microbuses”), who collaborated in the implementation of the first BRT line (“Metrobús”), coordinating local and international interests (Chérubin, 2020).

For his part, Acosta García (2023) analyzes the actions of cycling collectives in Mexico City, identifying them as forms of “grassroots urbanism”, characterized by their organizational capacity, solidarity, and resilience in the face of crises such as the 2017 earthquake and the

2019 gasoline shortage. These initiatives reflect how cycling activism not only promotes sustainable mobility but also provides collective responses to urban emergencies, strengthening community networks. As for García (2023), from an anthropological perspective, examines the transgression of traffic regulations by cycling activists, interpreting it as an urban ritual that, in addition to challenging the established order, highlights the injustices of mobility policies and exposes the vulnerability of those who travel by bicycle.

These and other studies highlight key differences between traditional and contemporary social movements. Advocates for bicycle use and sustainable mobility primarily come from the “upper middle classes” (Chérubin, 2020) and the “environmentalist middle classes” (Sosa López, 2021), with notable female participation, unlike traditional movements, which have historically been led by popular sectors (Chérubin, 2020, p. 535). Additionally, their academic credentials, international exposure, and global networks provide them with greater capacity to negotiate with authorities, engage media outlets, and leverage global social capital (Chérubin, 2020, p. 539).

These movements are also distinguished by their “prefigurative” nature (Zamorano Villareal, 2019), as they do not seek to access political power, but aim to build urban alternatives from the margins, anticipating the city they wish to inhabit. Zamorano Villareal (2019) differentiates between “classic” urban social movements, focused on access to land and housing, and “emerging” ones, which are less closely tied to political parties and are oriented toward the defense of urban rights. According to the author, the latter category includes cycling activist collectives such as the pioneering Bicitekas movement, established in 1997 and legally constituted as a civil association in 2001.

Neveu (2019) defines social movements as forms of collective, concerted, and intentional action with a clear political component aimed at defending a common cause under a logic of vindication. They are based on an “explicit intention to cooperate” and seek to act as a collective counterweight to social dynamics, demanding concrete responses to the problems that motivate their mobilization. From this perspective, social movements that sustain themselves over time and achieve a certain degree of success tend to transform into pressure groups. This evolution allows them to access spaces where public policies are defined and negotiated, transitioning from marginal actors to legitimate interlocutors in decision-making processes. Their

“crystallization” into pressure groups means their capacity for influence no longer depends solely on mass mobilizations or disruptive actions but also on their integration into formal political frameworks, actively participating in debates and negotiations. Along similar lines, Santillán (2013) argues that civil society cannot always remain completely separate from or in constant opposition to the State; it is essential for it to interact with public institutions to have an effective impact.

Based on this premise, this article analyzes how the cycling movement in Mexico has evolved through the transformation of its forms of action and organization, an essential process for legitimizing its demands and positioning its main causes on the public agenda. This evolution has allowed cycling activism to establish itself as a key player in transforming mobility policies in the country. Furthermore, it explores the factors that motivate participation in cycling activism and examines its main demands, with particular attention to their evolution. To this end, after presenting the methodology used and the profile of the interviewees, the following axes of analysis will be addressed: 1) the motivations and levers for action (reasons and causes that drive participation in cycling movements); 2) the priorities in demands and actions, also reflected in the cyclist’s vision of the city; 3) the forms of action and protest repertoires, analyzed using the typology proposed by Cox (2019), based on Lofland (1993); and 4) the evolution and transformation of these strategies over time. Using Cox’s typology helps identify the most common actions within Mexican cycling activism and evaluate, based on participants’ testimonies, which have had the greatest impact. In this way, we examine the forms of action and protest repertoires that, according to the cycling activists themselves, have been fundamental to legitimizing the cycling agenda at both the local and national levels.

Methodology

The methodology employed is mixed, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques and adopting a phenomenological approach aimed at exploring in depth the experiences, motivations, perceptions, and strategies employed by activists. This approach provides an understanding of the demands, causes, and modes of action of the cycling movement in different local contexts.

In the qualitative component, 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted in 2023 with individuals who identified themselves as “cycling activists” or “bicycle activists”, who responded to a call for proposals disseminated through social media platforms such as X and Facebook. The sample included participants from 30 states in Mexico²: This allowed for the capture of diverse regional perspectives. Since the interviewees resided in different cities across the country, the interviews were conducted via videoconferences, thus facilitating participation and ensuring access to representative voices of the movement at the national level.

As part of the quantitative approach, 484 brief questionnaires were administered to identify the different causes of the cycling movement in Mexico. The questionnaire began by asking respondents to self-identify as cycling activists, inviting them to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 10 according to their level of involvement in the movement and their self-perception as activists. Subsequently, the respondents answered three questions related to the identity and causes of the cycling movement in Mexico: What type of movement is cycling activism? What are the main struggles of cycling activism? And what actions have the greatest impact on promoting bicycle use?

The multivariate analysis consisted of constructing classification models using genetic algorithms, taking the self-assigned value as a cycling activist as the dependent variable and the ratings given to the response options remove as the independent variables. The models were validated verified using resampling and external validation techniques, based on the coefficient of determination (R^2), the cross-validation coefficient (Q^2), the standard deviation (s), and Fisher’s F statistic, derived from the analysis of variance of the model (Pavan *et al.*, 2004). In addition, cross-interaction between variables were examined using ANOVA and Principal Component Analysis (PCA).

The combination of in-depth interviews with a structured questionnaire allowed for data triangulation, providing both an in-depth analysis of individual experiences and a broader view of general trends within the cycling activism movement in Mexico.

2 Baja California and Zacatecas states are not represented.

Results and Discussion

Sociodemographic Profile of the People Interviewed

This study sought to achieve gender parity among participants to the greatest extent possible. As a result, the distribution of interviewees was nearly proportional, with 53.3% men and 46.7% women, as shown in Table 1³. Regarding age, most interviewees were between 30 and 50 years old, representing 76.7% of participants. No significant differences were found in marital status or educational level related to the gender of the participants in the qualitative analysis. Regarding income level, most interviewees fell into the middle class (31.7%) and upper-middle class (35%) strata, according to the criteria of the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI, 2021). Meanwhile, 25% fell into the lower class, and 8.3% fell into the upper class. Regarding the quantitative analysis, gender data collected from the short questionnaires showed a distribution of 50.8% men and 49.2% women.

Motivations for Action

The motivations that drive people to take action stem from a complex combination of reasons and causes: reasons are conscious arguments or deliberate reasoning that people put forward to justify their actions, while causes represent the structural or contextual factors that influence the decision to act (Bajoit, 2009, p. 15). For example, mobilizing out of a conviction to combat climate change is one reason, while a context of increasing road insecurity is a structural cause that motivates mobilization. This section examines how these reasons and causes manifest themselves in the context of cycling activism, exploring how individual convictions intersect with structural factors to drive people to action.

From a Feeling of Vulnerability to the Fight for Road Safety

The analysis of the interviews reveals that the essential condition for becoming a cycling activist is fundamentally rooted in the use of the bicycle as a mode of transportation. Many cycling activists began

³ Tables and figures are found in the Appendix at the end of this article (Editor's Note).

using bicycles for personal reasons, such as improving their health, losing weight, recreation, exercising in the mountains, attending university, or saving money. For some, the bicycle emerged as an economical and efficient alternative to inadequate public transportation, offering greater flexibility in their schedules and travel. The following testimony exemplifies this point:

I was looking for a faster, more economical means of transportation that would also give me greater control over my schedule, even though I was still a bachelor's student (female, 26 years old, Mexico City).

After adopting the bicycle as a mode of transportation, many of the interviewees began to experience firsthand the difficulties and challenges of navigating an urban environment hostile to cyclists, which gave rise to a profound sense of vulnerability.

This feeling of vulnerability is a constant for urban cyclists. Emotions such as fear, apprehension, and anger frequently arise due to the lack of adequate infrastructure and road safety, compounded by drivers' failure to comply with traffic regulations. This insecurity results in an ongoing concern for their physical safety when traveling by bicycle in the city.

Yes, anger. Fear too, because you're riding, and an incident occurs precisely because of the lack of infrastructure, and your life is at risk. So, out of anger and fear that something might happen to me, "Who's going to be responsible for me? Who's going to support me? How can I prevent something from happening to me?" And that's the main demand for cycling infrastructure (woman, 26, Mexico City).

For many, this feeling of vulnerability and danger serves as a catalyst, driving the demand for better conditions for safe travel and greater protection in road spaces.

Since I started using the bike as my primary means of transportation, about 95% of the time, I began to realize all the circumstances, the insecurity we face, that here in Colima there are no proper bike lanes, there are only stretches, and I started to connect with people who have been cycling for longer and we started to talk about what we could do (woman, 65 years old, Colima).

A Triggering Event: The Death of a Cyclist as a Turning Point

More notably, three interviewees mentioned the death of a cyclist, whether a friend or family member, as a key trigger for their

involvement in cycling activism. These tragedies not only deeply affected those who experienced or witnessed them but also served as a decisive impetus to take a more active role in the fight for cyclist safety.

[One day] on the corner of my house, here in Querétaro, a fellow cyclist [...] died, whether it was murder or an accident [...]. That day I made a change from “OK, I’m promoting cycling, but there’s also this other worrying side to it, which is that we’re being murdered”. That day I shifted my focus to being a bit more of an activist [...]. At that moment [...] another collective was born called Ciclismo Urbano Querétaro, which is very involved in raising awareness, denouncing, pointing out omissions, the lack of infrastructure [...] and that’s how I began to consider myself a cycling activist (male, 29 years old, Queretaro).

In one case, a woman who did not ride a bicycle became a cycling activist after her sister was struck and killed by a public transport vehicle. Therefore, although less common, the death of a cyclist can become a turning point that motivates people to get involved in the cause, even if they were not previously cyclists.

Experience Abroad: Discovering the Viability of Bicycle Transportation

Another key driver for becoming a cycling activist is the experience of living in foreign cities where the bicycle is a safe and widely used mode of transportation. This experience highlights the importance of cycling as a viable alternative for getting around. The focus is often on safety: the contrast between bicycle mobility abroad and the precarious conditions in their hometowns motivates individuals to demand better mobility conditions.

When I returned to Mexico City, I stayed there for a few years and continued using public transportation. So, my transition wasn’t immediate, at the time (2007) the conditions for getting around by bike were very limited, so it didn’t even occur to me to replicate the lifestyle I had back then. From that moment on, it became very clear to me that there was a different way of doing things (female, 39, Mexico City).

Upon returning to Mexico, they carry with them the conviction that there are other ways of “building a city” and that it is crucial to promote a change in the way mobility is managed to create a safer and more respectful environment. This external influence inspires and/or reinforces their commitment to cycling activism, turning their personal experience into a foundation for driving change in their own cities.

Bike Ride as a Space for Socializing and a Platform for Activism

This diffusion process is evident in bike rides, which serve as key spaces for socializing and fostering cycling activism. What begins as a recreational activity often transforms into a platform for raising awareness and promoting activism. Participants who initially seek simply a space for recreation meet other cyclists who share concerns and ideas on topics such as urban mobility, road safety, cycling infrastructure, and other relevant issues.

Later, for recreational reasons, I attended the Bicitekas bike ride on Wednesday nights and learned to ride a bike [...]. The experience of the ride was incredible; I couldn't believe I could enjoy the city at 9 p.m. [...]. So, for recreational and experiential reasons, I started to focus on using my bike more and more, and on this ride, I met people and activists who immediately started talking to me about the right to the city, sustainability, and all these issues (woman, 46, Mexico City).

I didn't know anyone, so I started going. They organized a weekly ride, and [...] I started getting more and more involved. I started attending meetings and began to understand more about what the collective was about. Then we expanded a little [and] joined Bicired, where we started to learn a little about bicycle politics (man, 39, Tamaulipas).

Bike rides offer participants the opportunity to experience the city from a different perspective while also creating an environment conducive to exchanging ideas and concerns about urban mobility. These stories demonstrate how an initially recreational activity can become a gateway to activism.

From Individual Initiative to Collective Actions

Social science theories have devoted considerable attention to understanding how individual actions transform into collective action (Alonso, 2013). This interest stems from the need to comprehend how the isolated behaviors of individuals, driven by their interests and/or concerns, converge into coordinated collective efforts. Field data reveal that many people began their participation individually before joining a group and engaging in collective action. In many cases, this process of involvement begins with personal initiatives, such as promoting bicycle use in the workplace in local communities, and gradually evolves into a broader commitment to cycling activism.

I set out [...] to tour the 58 municipalities that make up San Luis Potosí to promote the use of bicycles as a means of transportation with local authorities [...] I finished that tour obviously with greater conviction to promote cycling as a tool to guarantee the sustainability of our cities (man, 36 years old, San Luis Potosí).

From the man in San Luis Potosí who undertook bicycle tours throughout his city to raise awareness about bicycle use, to a woman in Cuernavaca who decided to teach urban cycling classes in her community, and a young woman in Mexico City who independently advocated for the installation of bike parking at her workplace, these personal initiatives stand out for their desire to generate change on a small scale. They are often the first step toward more active participation in the dynamics of organized civil society. Such participation is driven by the search for strategic alliances, the desire to join forces around a common cause, and a sense of belonging to a community with shared interests.

Values, Demands, and Claims

Classification Models

To provide an initial description of cycling activism in Mexico, we constructed classification models. These models are widely used to explore data, examine the interrelationships among variables, and establish priorities. In this case, the models provided insights into the self-perception of the movement, as well as the priorities for demands and actions of those who identify as cycling activists.

The quantitative analysis generated models that revealed a direct relationship with indicators of the movement's self-perception and its demands (Table 2). All models showed a strong self-perception of cycling activism as a social movement (M6) and highlighted its demand for road safety (L1). The third indicator varied across the models; the most significant was the demand for the right to mobility (L2). Model 2 incorporated the demand for the right to the city (L5), while Model 3 incorporated another self-perception indicator, identifying cycling activism as an environmental movement (M4). Figure 1 shows the predicted activity versus the experimental activity, using a training set for Models 1, 2, and 3.

Causes Defended by Cycling Activism

Multivariate analysis identified road safety and the right to mobility as the main demands of cycling activism (Figure 2). The previous sections emphasized the importance of road safety not only as a factor motivating people to engage in cycling activism but also as a fundamental pillar in the fight for better conditions for cyclists. A study conducted with female cycling activists in Santiago, Chile, also highlighted these factors. Participants noted that current legislation is primarily drafted by decision-makers, who are users of motorized modes, and whose biased perspective ignores or minimizes the needs of those who travel by non-motorized modes (Robles *et al.*, 2023).

Environmental sustainability is another key issue for cycling movements, highlighting that the bicycle is much more than a mode of transportation; it is also a tool for building more environmentally friendly cities. The fight against the climate crisis, decarbonization, reducing air pollution, and the efficient use of energy are some of the main objectives driving the promotion of bicycles. In this context, cycling activism is closely linked to environmental advocacy through concrete actions, such as protecting and conserving natural spaces. A representative example of this occurred in Aguascalientes, where a ride organized in defense of a forest ultimately led, after years of mobilization and persistence, to its official recognition as a protected natural area.

Although many of cyclists' demands are local in nature, such as the creating of cycle lanes or the improving of urban bicycle infrastructure, these demands are part of a broader struggle that transcends territorial boundaries and connects with global challenges, such as environmental sustainability and climate change mitigation. This dynamic aligns with Touraine's (1992) perspective, which argues that new social movements combine a local dimension, focused on the immediate needs and demands of communities, with a global dimension that situates them within the context of major structural transformations.

Multivariate analysis reveals how the cycling activist profile associates environmental sustainability with the right to the city and the fight for more humane cities, emphasizing the role of cyclists in advocating for fair, inclusive, and democratic urban environments. Although other issues, such as health promotion, are also part of the cycling activism agenda, their relevance is less prominent compared to

road safety and the right to mobility. Nevertheless, these aspects remain important objectives for many activists. For example, some include mountain biking as part of their activities. One activist from Tlaxcala expresses it this way: “I consider myself a cycling activist because we have instilled in people sport, so that through their own merit they can reach the same destinations as the entire group.

This lack of connection between recreational cycling and cycling as a mode of transportation has also been documented in Argentina (Rinaldi, 2018). The main challenge lies in the perception of recreational cycling primarily as a leisure activity. However, some groups in Mexico argue that promoting health through mountain biking can also help reaffirm the role of the bicycle, using the sport as a way to reconnect with the non-urban environment and highlight its social and environmental relevance.

Another important cause of the cycling movement, although less explicitly stated than others, is the effort to break the stigmas associated with bicycle use. This aim seeks to reshape societal perceptions of the bicycle, moving away from the idea that it is solely a mode of transportation for the lower classes and instead positioning it as a viable and appealing option for the middle class.

I think the most interesting thing about the activities [we were doing] was that cycling became more aspirational, that it became something sexy. So to speak, something that would be difficult to achieve with public transportation. So maybe it also had something to do with [...] Ecobici and the infrastructure that was built, but it did become [...] a topic [...] in fashion in the best sense of the word. And now, I think cycling has become a lifestyle (man, 53, Mexico City).

Ideal city: The Vision of Cycling Activists

The diversity of the causes championed by cycling activists is reflected in the abundance of adjectives, the richness of their vocabulary, and the variety of images they use to describe their vision of the ideal city. For those interviewed, the ideal city is one that follows a different design, a “mixed and dense” city, “with more public spaces”, “complete streets”, and “clearly defined school zones”, in short, a more “walkable” city. It is also a more “human” city, which includes one that is more “empathetic”, “safe”, “peaceful”, “friendly”, where “road peace” and “coexistence” prevail. It also refers to a “healthier”, “active”, and “vibrant” city that prioritizes public health. In this sense, it is a city that focuses

on people's well-being, where they experience "less stress", "a better mood", "are happier", and where children "can be happy" because they would live in an "enjoyable" and "more fun" city.

Another key aspect of these representations is the vision of an inclusive city, designed "for everyone", that considers the needs of people with disabilities, children, adolescents, and women responsible for care work, thus creating a "fairer and more democratic" environment. Likewise, it imagines a city committed to the environment, characterized by "greater biodiversity", "green streets", and "abundant vegetation and trees", which contribute to collective well-being and urban sustainability.

In summary, the vision of the ideal city projected by cycling activists expresses a deep desire to transform urban environments into more pleasant, inclusive, and sustainable spaces that guarantee the health and well-being of their inhabitants. As Rodríguez-Mera (2021) points out in her study of cycling organizations in Quito, Ecuador, the collective action of cycling activism is centered around the bicycle not only as a mode of transportation, but also as a tool for social and urban transformation. However, each cycling collective promotes specific projects and adopts its own forms of activism, tailored to their local contexts, which highlights their diversity and the particular interests that distinguish them as a heterogeneous social group.

Modalities of Collective Action and Protest Strategies

Cox (2019) develops a typology of six models of change that underpin the different forms of cycling activism. This typology is used as an analytical framework in this study to examine the strategies implemented by cycling activists in Mexico.

The first model is social contagion, where the cyclist acts as a role model, encouraging others to adopt cycling by highlighting its benefits. The second model involves educational and training activities aimed at improving cycling skills and raising awareness of mobility issues. The third model focuses on innovative and technological actions; in Mexico, cycling groups have mapped and georeferenced road accidents, sometimes even before authorities, using geographic information systems, open data, and participatory processes to inform safer mobility policies. The fourth model involves institutional lobbying, through which activists promote legislative and policy reforms that

favor bicycle use and the development of cycling infrastructure. The fifth model pertains to disruptive actions and social protests, such as mass rides or “Critical Masses”, which aim to make cyclists’ demands visible. Finally, the sixth model consists of prefigurative initiatives, where practices are adopted that anticipate the desired change, promoting the constant use of bicycles as part of a lifestyle that reflects the sustainable city the movement aspires to build.

We use this typology to analyze which of these forms of action are most common within Mexican cycling activism and which, according to participants’ testimonies, have had the greatest impact on legitimizing their demands and transforming mobility policies at the local and national levels.

Protest Repertoires and Most Effective Actions

When cycling activists were asked about the most effective actions to achieve the movement’s demands, most agreed that direct interventions in public spaces are the most impactful, particularly those that expose the lack of cycling infrastructure (see Figure 3). A prominent example is the “human bicycle fences”, a collective action designed to ensure safe passage for cyclists on high-traffic routes and to underscore the urgent need for safe and continuous bike lanes in these areas.

Activists also highlighted tactical urbanism as a key civic strategy, used both as a form of protest and as a tool to transform the use and perception of urban space. These temporary interventions, such as the installation of pop-up bike lanes or the occupation of public spaces, seek to redistribute urban space in favor of the most vulnerable populations (Silva, 2016). The growing popularity of these actions has been widely documented in recent years as examples of effective protest and the drive for social change (Tonkiss, 2013; Finn, 2014; Sawhney *et al.*, 2015).

Additionally, cycling activists have underscored the importance of “leading by example” and implementing educational initiatives. Both approaches, analyzed together using Principal Component Analysis (PCA), constitute a comprehensive method that combines everyday actions with training processes. This includes initiatives such as bike schools, aimed at promoting bicycle use among the population, and courses for decision-makers focused on incorporating the cycling agenda into public and urban policies.

Other relevant actions within cycling activism involve the strategic use of technology to address urban mobility challenges. A prominent example is the work of the Observatory for Sustainable Mobility of Mérida in Yucatán, the Bicicleta Blanca collective in Guadalajara, and the Fixiebeat collective in Ciudad Juárez, which began mapping road accident deaths using Geographic Information Systems (GIS) before the authorities did. The cartographic data generated by these tools has been key to identifying the areas with the highest road risk (Hernández-Hernández, 2012), providing solid evidence for collective complaints and pressuring authorities to make informed decisions. This technological approach is integrated with public policy advocacy strategies, where the collectives collaborate directly with government institutions through technical advice and support to incorporate their demands into the urban agenda.

Public protest is another key form of action within cycling activism, manifesting in various forms. An emblematic example is the Bicicleta Blanca, an anti-monument placed at sites where cyclists have lost their lives in road accidents. This symbolic action seeks to remind people of the dangers cyclists face and to demand improvements in road safety (Costantini, 2019). Roadblocks are also used to draw attention to the urgent need for safer and more accessible urban environments.

Among the most significant forms of protest is the bike ride, one of the most emblematic activities of cycling activism. This collective event has been instrumental in making cyclists visible in public spaces. Beyond their recreational nature, the rides have a strong symbolic and political content, as they represent a collective demand for the right to circulate safely and with dignity in cities.

Fifteen years ago [...] a group of people, friends, activists, we had a collective. The collective didn't have a name, and we had decided a few months before that we would have to do something so that what we did and what we thought would have social significance, would have a social impact. So we decided to call [...] a ride. We said, let's call people who like to ride bikes, we don't know how many there are and where they are (man, 62 years old, Aguascalientes).

Collective unity is a central characteristic of bicycle rides. In a context where urban infrastructure favors automobiles, cyclists protect each other and become visible to other traffic by riding together in large groups. This act of unity not only seeks physical safety from road hazards but also highlights the need for a structural transformation in how cities are planned and experienced. Riding in Critical Mass

means occupying a space that has often been denied or rendered invisible by urban policies.

In the Latin American context, there is ample evidence of Critical Mass as a repertoire of action for social bicycle movements. Cycling activists in Brazil and Uruguay, for example, point out that this activity also functions as a pedagogical tool, promoting educational processes of mutual respect and solidarity on urban roads through visibility and active participation (Troncoso *et al.*, 2019).

From Street Protests to Dialogue with the Authorities

Throughout the evolution of cycling activism in Mexico, the relationship between activists and authorities has undergone a significant transformation. Initially, these interactions were characterized by confrontation: activists openly questioned government decisions that, in their view, favored automotive infrastructure and hindered progress toward sustainable urban mobility.

Initially, protests in public demonstrations were cycling activism's primary tools for expressing discontent and generating social pressure. However, according to the interviewees, cycling activists eventually established themselves as key interlocutors in the political sphere. This shift represented a significant strategic transformation: from resistance and criticism emerged opportunities for dialogue with decision-makers, facilitating more active participation in public policymaking. The movement broadened its focus, complementing protest actions with lobbying, capacity building, and citizen activation strategies, thus consolidating its role as a relevant actor in urban mobility transformation.

Starting with initiatives such as “No to the Second Floor” and “No to Expressways”, cycling activism in Mexico evolved toward demanding formal commitments from authorities to implement a sustainable transportation agenda. Cycling activists began demanding concrete commitments from political candidates, conducted formal evaluations of public policies, and proposed proactive alternatives, including the design of Comprehensive Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans for authorities.

This closer collaboration with public institutions allowed some cycling activists to access decision-making positions within the government, from where they could effectively lobby, manage public

resources, and position sustainable mobility discourse in political spaces that had previously ignored it. Furthermore, their influence extended to the international arena, as they joined organizations such as the World Resources Institute (WRI) and the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP).

Another thing that has changed is that those who once considered themselves activists have also made the leap to become decision-makers and participate in change from within government structures (male, 33, Jalisco).

However, the transition of some cycling activists to public office has generated suspicion and tension within the movement itself. Several interviewees pointed out that access to these positions could lead to the pursuit of personal interests, raising questions about whether the commitment remains focused on collective well-being or whether power dynamics have altered the fundamental principles and demands of cycling activism.

There are those who come into politics and think, “Let’s take advantage, we’re building relationships”, so they look for our support [...]. I think some people in politics in particular have hindered some processes (male, 37, Queretaro).

At the same time, civil society organizations such as Bicitekas, A.C., which initially relied exclusively on volunteers, began receiving funding from international organizations, such as the Hewlett Foundation, and even from the Mexico City government itself. According to those interviewed, access to these resources has accelerated the public agenda in favor of sustainable, non-motorized mobility, enhancing their advocacy capabilities.

The relationship between street-level groups, employees of international organizations, members of funded civil society organizations who design and/or implement specialized projects, and those who have entered public office not only reflects the diversity of cycling activism in Mexico but has also generated conflicts, tensions, and challenges in coordinating efforts for urban transformations. However, despite these differences in strategies and forms of action, a shared vision of desired urban changes persists, aligned with a common model of an ideal city.

The Conquest of Public and Political Space

Although Mexican cities remain predominantly influenced by the “automobile system”, cycling activists report significant progress in appropriating both public and political space. This progress is reflected in the expansion of cycling infrastructure, the growing Number of cyclists, and greater political recognition of cycling as a legitimate and necessary mode of urban transportation.

Recreational paths, for example, emerged as a cycling activism initiative and were later adopted as government policy in cities such as Mexico City, Guadalajara, Puebla, Monterrey, and Tijuana. These initiatives, which involve closing streets to motorized vehicles and opening them to people for recreational activities (Sarmiento *et al.*, 2017), seek to promote active mobility, encourage physical activity, and enhance the enjoyment of public space.

The conquest of urban space is not limited to temporary street reclamation policies but also includes profound transformations of urban infrastructure. In Mexico City, between 2018 and 2024, the bike lane network expanded from 274 to 573 kilometers, including 473 active kilometers and some temporary or out-of-service sections. At the same time, bicycle trips increased by 71%, from 267,000 to more than 450,000 daily trips (Mexico City Government, 2024).

Another major change in urban mobility management has been the incorporation of public bicycle systems in the country’s major cities. In the Guadalajara metropolitan area, for example, the MiBici system currently has 3,972 bicycles and 360 stations distributed across the municipalities of Guadalajara, Zapopan, and Tlaquepaque (AMIM, 2024). In Mexico City, the expansion of the Ecobici system now includes 678 bicycle stations and 9,300 bicycles (Mexico City Government, 2024).

While public and discursive space has been gained in these two metropolitan areas, the collective advance to consolidate the urban agenda continues in other states. In San Luis Potosí, cycling activists are protesting to prevent the removal of established cycling infrastructure; in Querétaro, they are denouncing the construction of new roadways that exclude bicycle and pedestrian mobility; in Ciudad Juárez, the monthly Critical Mass rally brings together thousands of people to reclaim roadways; in Guanajuato, cycling activists have filed injunctions to redirect mobility budgets, facing resistance from the

municipality of León. In Aguascalientes, bike schools organized by local activists have evolved into government and private programs, aimed not only at promoting bicycle use but also at training freight transport operators.

From Local to National Level

Over time, the combined actions mentioned above have transcended the local level, expanding their influence nationally. Initiatives such as bike rides, workshops, protests, and lobbying efforts have been key to promoting public policies in favor of bicycles, sustainable mobility, and road safety. A prominent example is the participation of organized civil society in promoting the recognition of mobility as a right, which was established in the Mexican Constitution on December 18, 2020, when Congress approved reforms to Article 4 of the Magna Carta. These reforms establish that “every person has the right to mobility in conditions of road safety, accessibility, efficiency, sustainability, quality, inclusion, and equality”.

The constitutional amendment subsequently paved the way for the creation of the General Law on Mobility and Road Safety (LGMSV, 2023). Published on May 17, 2022, in the Official Gazette of the Federation (DOF), this law seeks to guarantee the right to mobility and establishes measures to reduce traffic accidents and promote safer and more efficient use of road space.

This process, which took several years, was led, lobbied for, and defended by dozens of civil society organizations and groups, coordinated through the Safe Mobility Coalition, with the aim of improving Mexican regulations and ensuring better mobility conditions for all. The professionalization of cycling groups, along with effective communication between the country’s different organizations, the strategic and coordinated use of social media, and close collaboration with legislators, enabled the cycling movement to make significant progress in creating the LGMSV. Furthermore, this effort facilitated the subsequent harmonization of state laws, thus establishing a coherent legal framework throughout the country.

I had to speak with legislators to convince them that we needed this right in our Constitution, and then, with the law, explain why certain provisions were key to the hierarchy of mobility (woman, 39 years old, Mexico City).

As Pasapera (2024) explains in his study with cycling activists in Peru, the formation of networks and connections between groups at the local, national, and international levels is essential for the feedback of knowledge and the implementation of actions that translate into public policies. Furthermore, according to Sagaris and Arora (2017), inclusive participatory processes act as catalysts for mobility policies; citizen participation not only allows for the expression of needs but also becomes a tool for the co-creation of public policies that promote social inclusion, effectiveness, and legitimacy.

The visibility of the movement and its ability to establish connections have been key for various private initiatives to implement permanent road safety programs, both within and outside their companies. The impetus from civil society has encouraged the participation of companies such as the insurance company AXA, through its *Reacciona por la Vida* program, as well as local initiatives such as Mapasin in Culiacán and the Placemaking Foundation.

In addition to the above, various groups and cycling activists have developed specialized consultancies to offer technical services to authorities in support of urban mobility projects. These consultancies include Bikencity, CityEs!, Moverte, and Céntrico. Notably, many of the leaders of these consultancies come from diverse professional backgrounds rather than formal urban planning education, yet they have found in the urban agenda an opportunity to apply their skills and contribute to the transformation of cities.

From Marginalization to Legitimization of Urban Cycling

For those interviewed, bicycle use in Mexico has undergone a notable transformation, going from being viewed as something marginal or eccentric to an increasingly accepted and normalized mode of transportation. What was once perceived as an unusual activity has gained social legitimacy: the presence of bicycles in public spaces is no longer systematically questioned, reflecting a profound shift in the collective mentality.

I see friends who 10 years ago called me crazy because I moved around by bicycle and who today write to me like this: You were right, I now use Ecobici, I now have my own bike, and it's great (woman, 35 years old, Mexico City).

Recognition of bicycle use has grown not only among the population but also among authorities. While progress has not been uniform or sufficient, there has been a shift in official discourse:

We won the argument that [the bicycle] must be included in sustainable mobility policies, although [...] not enough has been done, at least on a discursive level, it's no longer like before when they told us that Mexico was not Amsterdam or that [the bicycle] was for a bicycle town [...]. The most advanced cities began to lead the way and show that a sustainable mobility policy had to include the bicycle, so we began to see more interest and decision-making that was previously unthinkable (man, 53 years old, Mexico City).

The change in the government's stance is also evident in its campaign promises and political decisions.

Right now, no mayor is talking about removing bike lanes, which was a battle we had to fight in 2018. It was a very tough battle because removing that bike lane had practically been a campaign promise (woman, 41, Guerrero).

We achieved that place on the public agenda through many years of insisting on the issue. I remember when I was a congresswoman, no one talked about mobility. [...] Reporters didn't even know what it was, much less politicians. I had to chase them everywhere to get an interview so we could position the issue and talk about what we wanted to do [...]. Today, there isn't a single government, official or politician seeking public office [...] who doesn't include mobility as one of their central proposals (woman, 41, Mexico City).

Conclusion

Although cycling activism initially focused on raising awareness of urban problems through criticism of roadworks, megaprojects, and direct confrontation with authorities, its ability to generate lasting change has depended on two key factors. First, the formalization of social movements into structured organizations, formed as associations or consultancies, has allowed for their recognition by political interlocutors and greater influence on their causes (Neveu, 2019). Second, their integration into formal processes of political dialogue and negotiation, described as the "institutionalization of public debate" (Bajoit, 2009), has increased the visibility of cycling activism's demands, leading to concrete changes in urban design and the creation of new laws, programs, and regulations.

The multiple causes championed by cycling activism highlight the intersection of urban mobility, the environment, road safety, social equity, and public health. This demonstrates how cycling activism is part of a broader movement for the right to the city, advocating for more equitable access to urban resources and promoting residents' active participation in the design and transformation of the city. This participation includes the ability to influence planning policies and urbanization processes, as well as to reinvent the city according to its inhabitants' needs (Harvey, 2013).

Although the right to the city is not always explicitly mentioned in cycling activism discourses, the demands in Mexico reflect, in practice, this goal of transforming urban space in favor of a more just and participatory city. The cycling movement's demands extend beyond promoting bicycle use; they call for active participation in the urban agenda, placing human-scale city design at the center of urban policies.

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Annex

Table 1
General Composition of the Sample (Cycling Activists Interviewed)

Variables	Interviewees	
	n	%
Gender		
Male	32	53.3
Female	28	46.7
Total	60	100
Age (years)		
20-29	5	8.3
30-39	25	41.7
40-49	21	35
50-59	6	10
60-69	3	5
Total	60	100
Marital status		
Married	16	26.7
Single	30	50
Separated	4	6.7
Common-law union	10	16.6
Total	60	100
Educational level		
Postgraduate education	19	31.6
Higher education	34	56.7
High school education	7	11.7
Total	60	100
Income level		
Lower class	15	25
Lower middle class	15	15
Upper middle class	10	16.7
Lower upper class	15	35
Upper class	5	8.3
Total	60	100

Source: Prepared by the authors based on semi-structured interviews.

Table 2

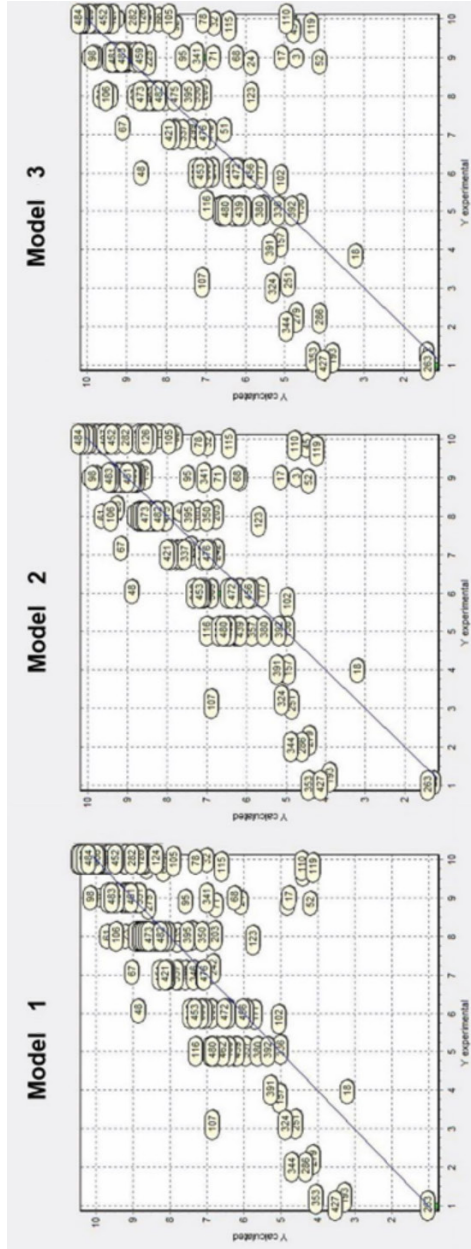
Classification Models

Model 1:				
Cycling activism = 0.6897(M6) + 0.3328(L1) + 0.0531(L2) - 0.1379				
n = 484	R ² = 79.30	Q ² = 78.68	s = 1.07	f = 289.6
Model 2:				
Cycling activism = 0.4663(M6) + 0.2998(L1) + 0.0163(L5) - 0.4766				
n = 484	R ² = 78.88	Q ² = 77.51	s = 1.02	f = 289.4
Model 3:				
Cycling activism = 0.4053(M6) + 0.2861(L1) + 0.0586(M4) - 0.4603				
n = 484	R ² = 76.98	Q ² = 75.59	s = 1.02	f = 289.2

R² = coefficient of determination, Q² = square of the validation coefficient, s = standard deviation, F = Fisher's statistic for the analysis of variance.

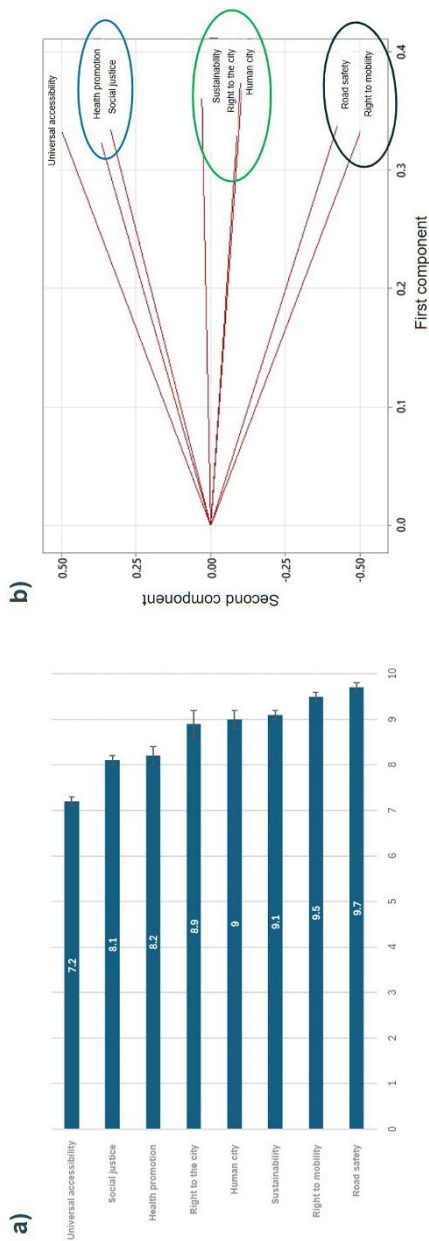
Source: Prepared by the authors based on short surveys (n = 484).

Figure 1
Self-Perception of Perceived vs. Actual Cycling Activism in Classification Models



Source: Prepared by the authors based on short surveys (n = 484)

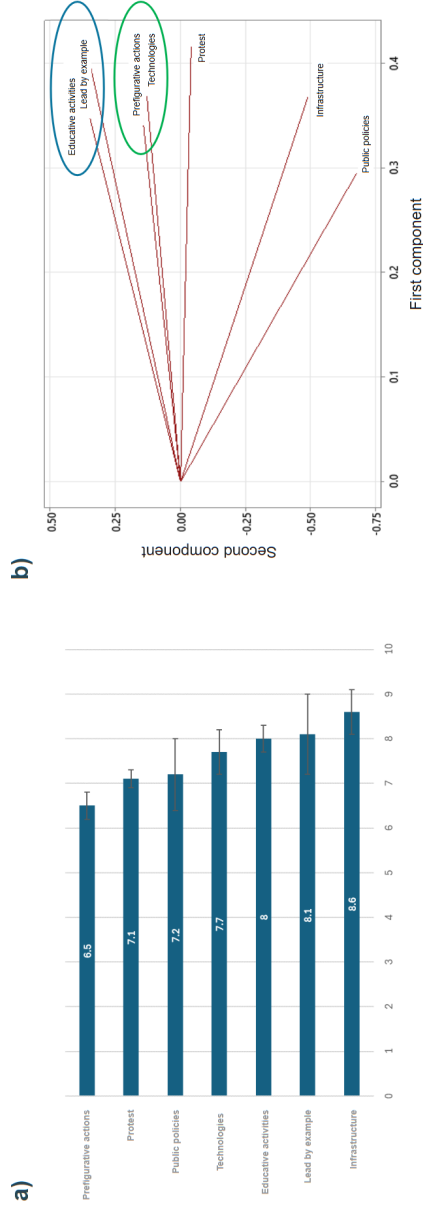
Figure 2
Quantitative Analysis of the Demands of the Cycling Movement in Mexico



a) Average score for the causes of the cycling movement as reported by surveyed cycling activists; b) Principal Components Analysis for the causes of the cycling movement in Mexico compared to the self-assigned cycling activism rating.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on short surveys (n = 484).

Figure 3
 Quantitative Analysis of the Actions of the Cycling Movement in Mexico



a) Average score for the cycling movement's activities as reported by surveyed cycling activists; b) Principal Components Analysis for the cycling movement's activities in Mexico compared to their self-assigned cycling activism rating.

Source: Prepared by the authors based on short surveys (n=484).

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