

The Dawn of India's Walking and Cycling Revolution



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The global pandemic redefined our relationship with our city streets and urban mobility.

As COVID-19 brought many cities to a halt, people all over India took to walking and cycling as a way to access essential goods and services, and even just as a form of recreation and exercise. Turning this crisis into an opportunity to reimagine people's relationships with their streets, the Government of India launched two visionary Challenges to embrace walking and cycling and promote a more sustainable, inclusive future for its citizens.

Above: Pilot interventions, like this protected cycle lane in the city of Udaipur, allowed cities to test and iterate designs based on public engagement.

Photo: ITDP India

The *India Cycles4Change Challenge* and *Streets4People Challenge* are both initiatives of India's Smart Cities Mission and the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs to support cities in piloting and implementing more pedestrian and cycling initiatives. These multi-stage Challenges encourage cities to work with residents, planners, and experts to implement permanent walking and cycling-friendly infrastructure, create institutional reforms, and build momentum for more accessible cities.

Over 100 Indian cities engaged with the two Challenges. Facilitated by ITDP India and the Smart Cities Mission, they were implemented as innovative capacity-building programs to provide technical guidance to decision-makers through monthly workshops, peer-learning platforms, design discussions, guidelines, templates, and more. The goal of the Challenges is to empower participating cities to lead India's most extensive walking and cycling revolution.

Through a number of engagement and outreach initiatives, participating cities put citizens at the heart of proposed solutions. In the first stage of the Challenges, cities piloted several low-cost and direct interventions, working closely with residents to test solutions, learn from the experiments, and scale them. During the second stage, cities explored means for

converting these temporary interventions into permanent pieces of replicable, scalable infrastructure alongside supporting policies that will sustain these efforts.

Thus far, participating cities have identified over 400 kilometers of main roads and over 3,500 kilometers of neighborhood streets that are candidates for cycling-friendly interventions, while also hosting more than 150 public Open Streets events since 2020. More people are walking and cycling in every city, with thousands showing up for rallies and Open Streets. City officials and public representatives are also leading by example — such as making a point to cycle to work — and have inspired private companies to launch their own ‘Cycle2Work’ campaigns for employees.

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THE APPROACH

Cities started out by listening to their citizens to understand needs and concerns through nationwide perception surveys. Along with residents, city leaders walked and cycled through streets to assess specific issues and discuss potential solutions. Through both on-the-ground and digital campaigns, cities tested quick and inexpensive interventions to make cycling and walking safer and more engaging, and to build widespread civic support.

Pilot interventions are subsequently being evaluated for their scalability across participating cities. This *Test-Learn-Scale* method is not a new approach to enacting urban interventions: applying it in the context of so many Indian cities is new. The Challenges introduced this method to help cities create solutions that meet the needs of their people, while also garnering public support and participation.

TESTING

Piloting and testing interventions, especially during a pandemic, was a quick and inexpensive way to make streets and junctions safer for walking and cycling, while allowing room for iteration. It also reduced public resistance by allowing people to engage with and explore alternatives before making permanent changes to streetscapes. Participating cities launched design competitions to crowdsource concepts from architects, planners, and designers to develop creative and unique public spaces and model neighborhoods.



Above: As seen here in the city of Kohima, gathering public feedback is a key part of the Challenges.

Photo: ITDP India

Below: The Challenges’ Test-Learn-Scale approach was new to many cities in India.

Photo: ITDP India





Above: Events were held as part of the Challenges to build public support, like this cycling rally in the city of Chandigarh.

Photo: ITDP India

Over 1,800 designers participated in these city-led competitions. One lesson cities learned from these activities was the art of using low-cost materials like paints, cones, and planters to create protected cycling lanes and pedestrian zones along main roads, which helped to calm traffic within many neighborhoods.

LEARNING

Once implemented, pilot interventions were evaluated and updated through community feedback, allowing residents and users to be an integral part of the process. This learning stage also helped address key concerns and build public interest and engagement. Cities documented their observations from all the test interventions — which included surveys, on-the-ground pilots, and community engagement campaigns — and shared what they learned with other cities. Cities also sought external feedback from diverse groups of stakeholders by: initiating discussions with traffic police, government officials, and civil society; surveying and interviewing local communities involved in pilots; using feedback boards at events; and promoting initiatives on social media.

SCALING

Of the more than 100 participating cities, 39 have led the walking and cycling revolution by creating on-the-ground transformations through their leadership and effective collaboration with citizens. These cities qualified for the second stage of the Challenges, with ₹10 million INR (over \$120,000 USD) of funding awarded to each of the top eleven.

The 39 cities are now scaling their pilots by expanding walking and cycling initiatives, adopting supportive policies, setting up oversight departments, and addressing on-street parking issues. One clear need is more financing — cities need their leaders to secure more funding for these efforts and to commit more investments into related infrastructure.

THE FUTURE

As India navigates a future following the pandemic, the focus is now turning towards reviving public transit systems. ITDP India and the Government of India have launched a third national Challenge program — the *Transport4All Digital Innovation Challenge* — in which cities are working with citizens and technology startups to develop solutions for making formal and informal transit safer, more convenient, and more affordable for all. The vision is for all of India to become a beacon of walking, cycling, and public transit innovation.

The more than 100 cities that joined in on the Challenges are expected to continue expanding their mobility plans and become pioneers for the rest of the country. Following the success of the first ‘season’ of the two Challenges, the second season has more than 50 additional cities participating. Though sparked by the disruptions of the pandemic, these Challenges have demonstrated the possibilities for Indian cities — and others around the world — to continue taking action on walking and cycling policies that are inclusive, iterative, and inspirational.

Right: Creative and engaging street designs help to make walking and cycling more appealing, as seen here in the city of Aurangabad.
Photo: ITDP India

