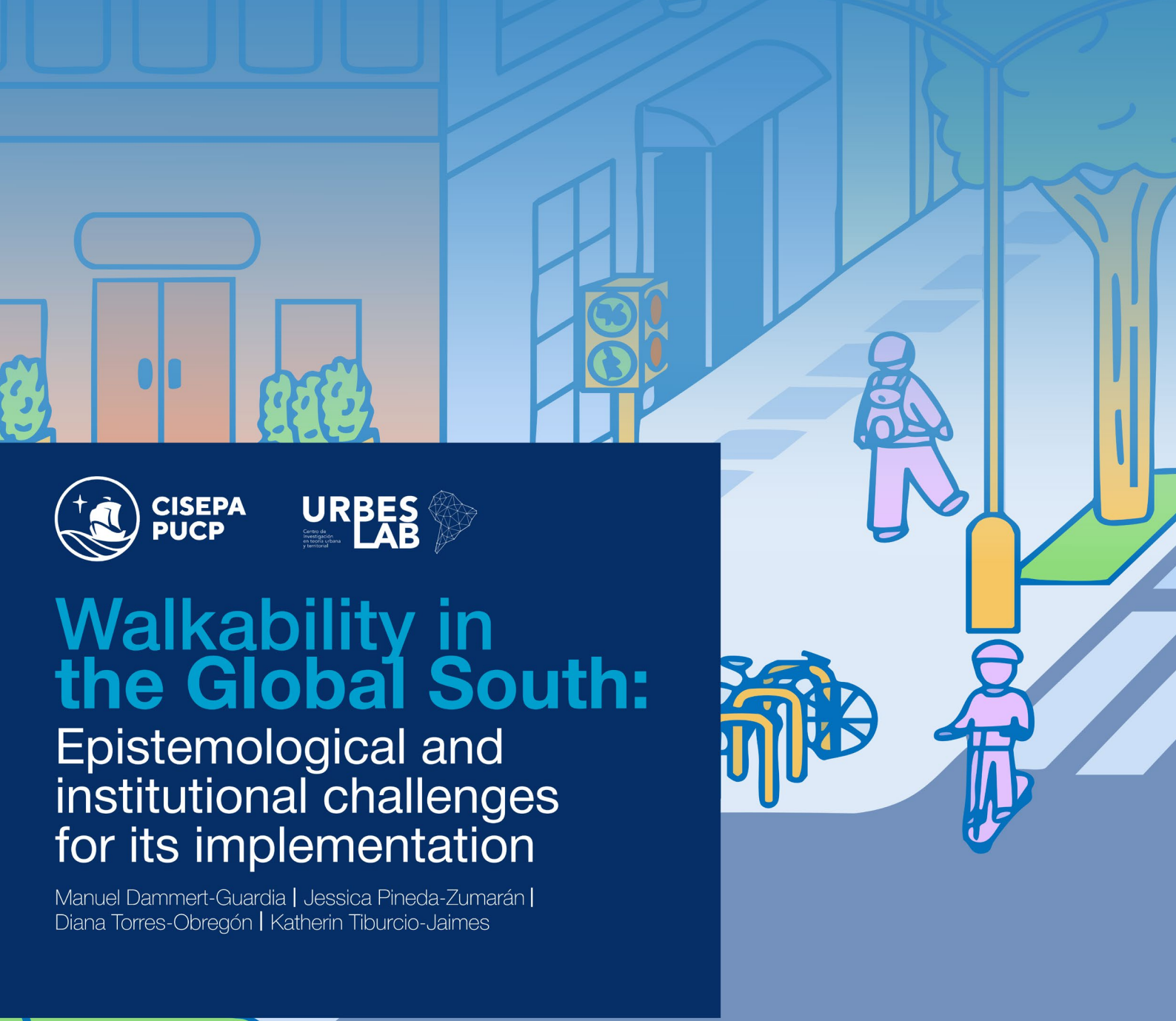

Walkability in the Global South:

Epistemological and institutional challenges for its implementation

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The project "Towards Walkability Transitions in Latin America: disentangling policy rationalities, institutional path dependencies and technical solutionist projects" [EP-2024-WK-02] is funded by the Volvo Research and Educational Foundations, VREF within its programme Walking as a mode of transport.

WALKABILITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGES FOR ITS IMPLEMENTATION

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Walkability has become a central component of international agendas for sustainable mobility, urban health, and territorial planning. Various international organisations and city networks promote walking as a key mode of transport to reduce emissions, improve public health, and strengthen urban public spaces.

However, in many cities in the Global South, adopting these agendas does not necessarily translate into significant transformations of the urban environment. Although concepts such as 'walkable cities' have been widely incorporated into public policy discourse, their implementation faces significant institutional barriers.

This policy brief presents research on walkability policies in Peru, with a focus on Arequipa. The study traces how global walkability ideas move between international, national, and local levels. The results show that the main barriers to implementing walkability policies are not just technical or financial. These barriers also appear because these ideas are reinterpreted as they move through fragmented institutional structures. Throughout the public policy process—from agenda-setting to project implementation—initial proposals are shaped by administrative frameworks, sectoral priorities, and existing routines.

This process produces what we call institutional adjustments. Here, global walkability agendas are translated into partial or fragmented solutions. These findings suggest that to achieve sustainable mobility in the Global South, we need to focus more on the institutional factors connecting policy ideas and urban projects.

2 WALKABILITY IN GLOBAL SUSTAINABLE MOBILITY AGENDAS

Walkability has emerged in the past two decades as a central concept in urban studies, mobility policy, transport planning, and public health. However, its definition is far from clear-cut. This circumstance creates at least three significant limitations to its adoption as a policy and mode of mobility: conceptual, methodological and epistemological. In the first case, Forsyth (2015) identifies three fundamental meanings of walkability. It is conceived as a measurement tool, a multidimensional concept and an implementation strategy. This conceptual ambiguity has direct implications for how policies are designed and implemented in Global South contexts, as it is impossible to aspire to something that is not clearly defined.

As for the methodological barrier, the literature on the subject has tended to treat walkability as an attribute of built space, focusing on qualities such as density, mixed-use, street connectivity, and pavement availability (Cervero et al., 2009; Fonseca et al., 2022). This perspective reinforces a technocratic approach that privileges measurable physical variables over subjective ones to assess walkability. For example, Southworth (2005) identifies key dimensions to be measured as accessibility, connectivity, safety, comfort, convenience, and pleasure. The consistent application of this approach has resulted in multiple indices and measurement tools, operationalised in tools such as Walk Score and in methodologies that combine GIS analysis and citizen perception (Arellana et al., 2020; Valverde-Caballero et al., 2024). However, not all of them are applicable or relevant to the urban context of the Global South.

Finally, regarding the epistemological barrier, Sagaris et al. (2022) show that scientific production on walkability is concentrated in the Global North. This concentration generates an epistemological bias in the knowledge produced and adopted in the Global South. Wood (2022) therefore argues for the need to "decolonise" the concept. He recognises that Latin American and Global South cities have dynamics that challenge the assumptions of dominant models. Recognising these qualities is important in the regions. Dovey and Pafka (2019) and Middleton (2010) emphasise that walking is a situated social, political and cultural practice. Here, informality, socio-spatial inequality and institutional fragmentation shape the implementation of urban policies.

In light of these three limitations, this policy brief argues for a shift in walkability policies in the Global South. Transitions towards walkable cities require shifting the focus from the physical design of walking spaces to the institutional conditions for implementation. The concept of walkability should be applied in context, with possible reforms in multilevel governance suggested.

The concept of walkability encompasses the physical, social, economic and experiential aspects of the urban environment that must be taken into account in order to put it into practice through policies, plans and projects in cities.

Figure 1. Walkability | Illustration. Ale Sotelo

3 RETHINKING WALKABILITY IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In Latin America and other regions of the Global South, walking is often a necessity rather than a choice (Oviedo et al., 2021; Nieto-Combariza et al., 2025). This situation is imbued with some significant characteristics of walking, such as the following, which together illustrate the complex realities of mobility in these contexts:

- Walking is stratified by social class, highlighting the existence of political economies of mobility.
- Many communities self-produce walking space in the absence of the state, creating survival infrastructures.
- Gender, age, and race greatly influence the walking experience, making walkability highly personalised.
- There are flexible, formal, and informal systems, referred to by some authors as paratransit (Cabrera & Moyano, 2022), that cover first- and last-mile mobility requirements, thereby complementing daily walking.

These walkability conditions require us to rethink walkability as an activity situated in the territory and in the subject, which, in turn, are conditioned by the institutional and planning frameworks that regulate and shape their interactions. In this sense, advancing the adoption and implementation of a walkability agenda in the Global South implies recognising the political, legal, and regulatory dimensions of the concept.

The implementation of walkability policies faces structural barriers in cities in the Global South (Nyachieo et al., 2025), such as:

- Multilevel fragmentation: disarticulation between the centralised state apparatus and subnational governments.
- Rigid public investment systems: prioritisation of vehicular infrastructure.
- Capture of conflicting interests: predominance of pro-car agendas.
- Lack of information and transparency.
- Mismatches between formal planning and urban informality.

Walking is stratified by social class, highlighting the existence of political economies in mobility.

In this context, walkability fails not because of a lack of technical diagnosis, but because of insufficient cross-sector coordination, a lack of integration between planning and budgeting, recognition of informal practices, and limited municipal technical capacities.

Walking infrastructure in lower-income neighbourhoods (Cayma, Arequipa)

Walking infrastructure in higher-income neighbourhoods (José Luis Bustamente y Riveiro, Arequipa)

Figure 2. Walking infrastructure in lower- and higher-income neighbourhoods of Arequipa, Peru

4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING WALKABILITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

In contexts of institutional weakness, such as those that characterise many countries in the Global South, international ideas about walkability undergo four recurring processes of transformation when implemented (Dammert-Guardia et al., Forthcoming):

A. Technocratic adjustment (international ▸ national)

Mobility plans adopt standardised models (often inspired by European frameworks), with little adaptation to the realities of incremental urbanisation, complex topographies and structural patterns of socio-spatial inequalities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Promote South–South networks and contextual translation**
  Avoid the uncritical transfer of models from the Global North. Support processes of contextual adaptation and horizontal learning between cities with similar realities and institutional frameworks.
- **Shift the emphasis from measurement to institutional architecture**
  The key question is not only how walkable a city is, but what institutional conditions enable pedestrian policies to be sustained.

B. Sectoral adjustment (national ▸ subnational)

Sustainable mobility frameworks are reinterpreted by ministries with overlapping responsibilities (transport, housing, finance, public works). Walkability is fragmented: as public space, as road safety, as universal accessibility, but rarely as a comprehensive mobility system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Establish mandatory mechanisms for cross-sector coordination**
  Create formal bodies to coordinate transport, housing, planning, and finance. Sectoral fragmentation is one of the main structural obstacles.

C. Budgetary adjustment (national ▸ subnational)

Public investment responds to the criteria of 'closing gaps' or short-term political visibility. Pedestrian projects compete with larger-scale road works that offer immediate political returns. The conditions in which walkability occurs are not considered a quantifiable social gap.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Integrate planning and public investment**
  Promote reforms that link urban planning instruments with national or municipal investment systems.
- **Encourage hybrid methodological approaches**
  Support research that combines spatial analysis with ethnography, participatory methods, and perception assessment to understand the socio-spatial inequalities of residents and design better public interventions.

D. Pragmatic adjustment during implementation (subnational ▸ local)

During implementation, projects are affected by technical constraints, community pressures, interference with basic services, or fear of administrative oversight. Pedestrian components may be reduced or eliminated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Strengthen local institutional capacities**
  Develop medium-term training and technical support programmes. One-off consultancies do not generate sustained institutional transformation.

- **Adaptive manuals for incremental urbanisation contexts**
  Walkability in the Global South is often a practice of necessity, with residents self-producing their infrastructure. Public intervention policies should not be fragmented, but should intervene in macro-areas.

These adjustments are not isolated failures; they constitute a cumulative system that structurally weakens walkability. Consequently, the concept can be incorporated into public policy discourse without clear mechanisms for intersectoral coordination for its implementation.

5 IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH AND COOPERATION

International initiatives have played an important role in promoting walkability as a key component of sustainable cities. However, the results of this research suggest that the impact of these agendas depends largely on the institutional conditions in which they are implemented.

To promote walkable cities in the Global South, it is crucial to build strong institutional capacities, not just to innovate in design or infrastructure. These capacities link public policy ideas to urban projects, laying the foundation for inclusive and sustainable mobility transitions.

Figure 3. Municipal intervention in Cayma, Arequipa. | Photo. The authors

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