

AcPrac Case Study

Questioning the Legitimacy of Inequality with Memes: The Experience of Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad

Dr Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina,
Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity

Atlantic *Fellows*

FOR SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC EQUITY

Design: Saaga Leppanen
Copy-editing: Yasmine Kherfi

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[Máximo Ernesto Jaramillo-Molina](#) is a Senior Atlantic Fellow for Social and Economic Equity at the LSE International Inequalities Institute and a researcher and activist dedicated to fighting inequality. He is Associate Professor at CUCSH, University of Guadalajara and the Co-founder of Institute of Studies on Inequality (INDESIG), based in Mexico. He is also the author of *Pobres porque quieren: Mitos de la desigualdad y la meritocracia* (2025).

About AFSEE

[The Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity \(AFSEE\)](#) at the LSE International Inequalities Institute is an innovative fellowship programme that is funded through a landmark grant from Atlantic Philanthropies.

AFSEE aims to build a community of changemakers whose work addresses social and economic inequalities across the globe, while supporting them in developing imaginative approaches to their work. Adopting an ethos of collective action, the programme encourages collaborations between a range of stakeholders, including academics, activists, artists, development practitioners, and policymakers.

About the AcPrac Project

This case study is published as part of the '[Exploring the Potential of Academic-Practitioner Collaborations for Social Change \(AcPrac\)](#)' project. The AcPrac project has two key objectives: 1) to contribute to AFSEE's theory of change by exploring the conditions that are conducive to developing generative processes of knowledge exchange between academics and practitioners; and 2) to examine the methodological and epistemological challenges of researching inequalities, and particularly how the latter might be reproduced through the research process itself.

The project also makes theoretical contributions by reflecting on the drivers behind the collaborations that different stakeholders pursue and it explores the potential of collaborative research, as a methodology, in challenging knowledge inequalities and in decolonising research.

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the experience of Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad in Latin America and Mexico, serving as a case study that examines the advantages of collaborations between academia and activism. It envisions potential forms of collaboration that could yield significant returns in generating social change. The paper's aim is to reflect on the particularities of this project, which succeeded in influencing debates around issues of inequality in Mexico. I recount the factors that contributed to creating the project, including the strategies employed to organically grow a larger audience, the use of academia to foster greater trust among our followers, the alliances and collaborations with media outlets (several with national reach), as well as the important role of civil society allies for the project's continued growth. The paper delves into the style of dissemination, which tends to be the most highly evaluated, frequently cited, and most striking feature of Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad. It also includes a reflection on both positive and negative experiences, as well as recommendations for anyone seeking to undertake a similar study.

Introduction

The narratives that legitimise inequality are perhaps the most important factor in understanding why extreme gaps persist, separating society in countries like Mexico and throughout Latin America. These narratives, such as the meritocratic narrative (which holds that everyone gets what they deserve according to their talent and effort), are reproduced and contested by various social actors. Numerous media outlets and influencers with large followings on social media often share and legitimise the meritocratic narrative.

In contrast, there are few (though increasingly more) who strive to challenge this. These include civil society organisations and academics, though recently there has been a growing number of social media activists who attempt to question the myth of meritocracy. The project "Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad" belongs to this small but growing group of activists who question the false ideas about the causes of poverty and wealth, and the legitimacy of inequality. They do so by combining the rigour of academia, the pragmatism of activists and the straightforward communication style of social media influencers.

This project is interesting because it clearly demonstrates the possibilities of dissolving the barriers that typically separate a supposedly objective academia from activism, which in turn aims to influence and impact social reality. Particularly, the case of Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad shows that it is possible to conduct academic research with robust methodologies on the most significant dimensions of inequality, while communicating such results in a simple and

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understandable (and even entertaining) way for the majority of citizens. It in turn demonstrates that it is possible to influence public affairs through various means, particularly by generating new narratives that challenge the prevailing inequality regime.

The case of *Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad* offers a clear example of the possibilities of combining activism and academic research, methodological rigour and communication using broadly understandable language. This project especially demonstrates new ways to question the legitimacy of inequality using viral communication tools and with the transparency and rigour of academia. It does so without giving into a fear of engaging in dialogue with authorities or important social actors, as well as by directly calling for people to take to the streets to express their demands.

Case Context

The Latin American region is one of the most unequal in the world (Busso & Messina, 2022; CEPAL, 2022; Milanovic, 2019). Within this region is Mexico, the second most populous country (after Brazil), with nearly 126 million people (INEGI, 2021), making it the country with the most Spanish speakers globally and one of the most unequal countries worldwide. In Mexico, the four richest individuals accumulate practically half of the country's total income (Esquivel, 2015). Nearly 7 out of 10 people born in the poorest 20% will die within that group (CEEY, 2019). Moreover, as the saying goes, if it is difficult to escape poverty, in Mexico it is even more difficult to 'escape wealth.'

As a result, more than 50% of the population in Mexico lives in income poverty (CONEVAL, 2021). The average salary is around 5,000 pesos (250 dollars), meaning 55% of the population has a salary insufficient to meet their basic needs. Consequently, there are increasing shortages in access to basic rights such as food, health, housing and education. It can be argued that the income distribution in Mexico is as unequal as the global income distribution (Vázquez et al., 2018).

Despite this (or perhaps because of it), the government has a low impact on income redistribution and reducing inequality. While government redistributive actions in some countries can lower the Gini coefficient (which measures income inequality) from levels above 0.5 to below 0.2 (as seen in Ireland, Finland and other countries), historically, the Mexican State has avoided significantly affecting the inequality regime through public actions or policies. According to OECD data (OECD Economics Department Policy Notes, 2012), the Gini coefficient in Mexico before government-led redistribution is around 0.47, and after government action, it decreases by a negligible amount. A very low level of tax collection (about 16% of GDP), which is also not very

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progressive (M. Jaramillo-Molina & Rodríguez Leal Isla, 2020), is combined in Mexico with a weak and limited social protection system. This system fails to guarantee social rights for the majority of the population and does not generate significant redistribution.

The outset of López Obrador's presidency in 2018 sparked hopes for transformative change in the inequality landscape, presented as a left-wing initiative in political and economic terms. However, evidence indicates that despite notable policies such as minimum wage hikes and support for union democracy, the decision not to raise taxes on the wealthiest (M. E. Jaramillo-Molina, 2022) and to shift from targeted social transfer programmes to universal ones has had significant repercussions. This shift has led to a decreased percentage of low-income individuals benefiting from government redistribution, while a higher proportion now benefits those in middle and high-income brackets (M. E. Jaramillo-Molina, 2021).

Moreover, to grasp the Mexican context fully, it is crucial to note that despite the country's historically extreme inequality levels, meritocratic narratives persist widely. A substantial portion of the population believes individuals are 'poor by choice,' attributing the vulnerability of the poorest to issues of mindset, attitude and lack of initiative. In many instances, they argue these individuals do not work, dislike working or rely solely on government assistance to survive. Additionally, there exists a subset of the population characterised by 'complex individualism' (Jaramillo, 2019). While not fully endorsing the meritocratic narrative that personal initiative alone enables anyone to escape poverty, this group contends that unequal opportunities are at the heart of the issue. Consequently, they advocate that providing education and healthcare should suffice to empower the poorest households, and so this cohort tends to critique more progressive policies involving market intervention and universal social protection.

With the context analysed thus far, it is evident that Mexico is a country with high, even extreme levels of inequality, frequently legitimising this disparity through meritocratic and individualistic narratives that overlook the genuine structural causes of inequality. This significantly influences the understanding of a regime where, as previously mentioned, Mexico exhibits low levels of tax collection and progressivity, alongside redistributive social policies. This state of affairs is endorsed by the populace, who perceive the government as corrupt and advocate for minimal intervention in the economy. In this scenario, the *Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad* project was developed, as detailed and analysed in the subsequent sections.

Fighting Inequality Through Social Media: An AcPrac Experiment

The meritocratic narratives that validate inequality, pervasive in Mexico as discussed earlier, are of interest not only to academics and activists, but to all citizens. The challenge lies in the fact

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that research findings on this topic from academia and universities often remain confined to small intellectual circles and are not widely disseminated. Several civil organisations in Mexico have endeavoured to communicate these research findings to the general public. Among these organisations, the case of Oxfam Mexico¹ stands out, among others. This successful example particularly arises from substantial collaborations between academia and activists and/or practitioners.

From my involvement with that organisation around 2018, along with my academic research analysing narratives that legitimised inequality and connected it to misinformation about the extent of inequity gaps and their true causes, I came to realise the necessity for a project in Mexico that could effectively disseminate information on inequality in a manner that was exceedingly simple and understandable for the majority of the population, while leveraging the viral nature of social media to reach a wider audience.

Therefore, the objective was clearly to engage the majority of the population in the critical discussions about inequality in Mexico, given the context where inequality is frequently justified despite a lack of readily available information about it. The response led to the creation of the Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad project, which integrated the methodological rigour of research directly from academia with the practicality of activism to develop campaigns and narratives that were easily communicable. This approach had a significant impact on citizens and in public opinion debates, utilising memes on social media as the most viral communication format of the 21st century thus far.

In October 2018, Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad was launched on Facebook, followed shortly by Twitter and Instagram. This project utilises cat photos paired with short messages (in meme² format) containing crucial and easily understandable information about inequality. Additionally, the accompanying text provides a more detailed explanation of the message shared, citing direct sources that support the information communicated.

Initially, posts on the Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad social media accounts were shared through my personal accounts. However, the growth was organic and nearly immediate, gaining over a thousand followers on Facebook in less than a week and ten thousand followers in under two months. Currently, the project boasts nearly 300,000 followers across different social media platforms, reaching several million accounts monthly. While the project's progression will be outlined later, it is crucial to note here that Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad advocates for the idea

¹ For instance, refer to Esquivel's (2015) report, which gained significant popularity at the time.

² More information about the origins of memes can be found in this Wikipedia entry (2022).

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that academic knowledge should be disseminated through activism. This is not only an ethical duty but also pivotal in shaping and laying the groundwork for potential calls for increased government intervention.



Figure 1: Examples of images shared on the Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad account. Source: Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad Instagram.

Outcomes of Collaborations Between Academia and Activists

There are at least three key points I wish to emphasise regarding the significance of collaborations between academia and activists or practitioners, as clearly exemplified in the Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad project. Firstly, perceptions and narratives surrounding inequality are of societal interest. As discussed in the contextual section, examining these narratives and perceptions in Mexico aids in comprehending how such a deeply unequal society and unjust nation persist. Furthermore, Mexico's situation is particularly compelling in justifying the origins of inequality, despite the evident inequitable and structural foundations of poverty and wealth among its populace.

The crux of the matter lies in these social structures being largely invisible and/or normalised. The normalisation of the causes of inequality stands as a primary barrier to understanding inequality in the country. Hence, it is evident that it is immensely important to strive to dismantle these meritocratic narratives and the prevalent myths that accompany them, a task that can be achieved very effectively through collaborations between academia and practitioners.

Secondly, it is important to note that achieving the dissemination and communication of messages aimed at debunking narratives that justify inequality requires finding means and channels that surpass traditional methods. Typically, academia disseminates research findings

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through articles published in specialised academic and non-academic journals, and increasingly through traditional media outlets and social media platforms. However, these efforts often have limited reach. University radio and television channels are generally unpopular, and their social media presence, bound by strict institutional frameworks, also struggles to gain significant traction. There are exceptions, such as cases and infographics that may occasionally go viral, but this is not the norm.

In this context, academia benefits from collaborating with activists and practitioners to open new communication channels with the broader population. Activist communication channels are generally broader, though they remain influenced by their own institutional structures. Some more established or traditional non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also use social media, albeit with limited success. In contrast, younger NGOs tend to utilise social media more freely, occasionally sharing memes and/or capitalising on current trends to effectively convey their messages.

There, the example of *Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad* becomes intriguing because it effectively adopts messages originating from academia but disseminates them through channels such as social media and memes, which are uncommon in academic circles. This approach reaches individuals whom other activist organisations may not engage. Clearly, this strategy favours a younger demographic (who frequently use social media³) with internet access⁴. However, these biases do not necessarily mean that messages conveyed through these channels are not widely received among the broader population.

Given these points, the third aspect underscoring the importance of collaborations between academia and practitioners is the use of simple and accessible language. Often, alongside concerns about the channels used by academia and activism to communicate information and narratives, a significant challenge lies in the complexity of language employed. This complexity may stem from academia's rigorous evaluation and review processes, leading researchers to use language that is sometimes convoluted and inaccessible to the majority of the population.

One of the crucial lessons frequently derived from the collaboration between academia and activism is the imperative to use simpler and more understandable language. This is something I observed in various experiences with NGOs I worked for, and it's a principle I aimed to apply in *Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad*. The language used and the words chosen to convey messages

³ This trend could potentially be counteracted through alternative forms of communication and advocacy, such as public demonstrations - one of the recent strategies being implemented by the project, as outlined in a subsequent section of the text.

⁴ As of 2021, internet access in Mexico extended to 76% of the population nationwide and 93% among individuals aged 18 to 24 (INEGI, 2022).

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strive to be as common and accessible as possible. Whenever a complex or uncommon term is used, immediate and straightforward explanations are provided. This approach has seemingly been one of the most praised aspects of our social media project, and I would even venture to say it is one of the least apparent to those of us behind the project, precisely because we strive to use the same clear and simple language when writing academic papers and for other purposes. We start from the belief that if something cannot be communicated simply, it is not clear enough even to the message sender.

In this regard, it is evident to me that one of the lessons from the Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad project is the importance of utilising new channels (such as social media) and clear, simple language to dismantle the principal myths and narratives that legitimise inequality in societies. Furthermore, this approach should be grounded in the use of academic research findings that can be cited, and preferably with analyses that are as transparent as possible to address any doubts that may arise in discussions sparked by the communicated messages⁵. These lessons can be taken up and enhanced by other projects seeking to benefit from collaborations between academia and activists.

The Evolution of Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad

Over the past four years since its inception in 2018, Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad has experienced rapid growth, expanding its objectives and operational strategies and gaining increased legitimacy across various sectors in Mexico and Latin America. As mentioned earlier, the project initially grew organically through my personal social networks. I recognise that this would not have been possible without my employment at Oxfam Mexico during that period, which connected me with diverse social media circles focused on inequality issues.

Initially, the primary source of cat photos used in the memes were two small cats I had adopted in October 2018. However, we soon implemented a strategy of inviting our social media followers to share photos of their own cats. These submissions were then featured in our posts across our networks. This approach proved engaging for our followers, as they saw their own cats contributing to the fight against inequality on social media.

The project relied solely on personal free time for implementation, without any external funding, and all growth in followers and social media reach occurred organically. Crucially, the project gained visibility on social media, particularly Twitter, where it was frequently shared by accounts with large followings across various sectors (academia, civil society, journalists and

⁵ For instance, one of the primary methods used since 2019 to enhance transparency in analyses is publishing statistical procedures for data analysis on platforms like GitHub or others.

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political activists). This exposure not only expanded its audience but also established it as an independent initiative, free from partisan affiliations albeit clearly aligned with a left-wing perspective.

Another pivotal aspect was the immediate pursuit of media outlets capable of publishing blogs beyond social media posts, facilitating broader access to analyses. Among the outlets that embraced the project were Chilango, Animal Político and Este País, largely due to Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad's popularity and their editorial openness.

In its second year, the project considered institutionalising through the establishment of a new civil organisation to bolster the credibility of its academic and research components. Thus, in January 2020, the Institute for Studies on Inequality, A.C. (INDESIG), was founded. While maintaining independence and separate governance from Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad, INDESIG became its primary institutional affiliate.

Another positive aspect that has enhanced the reach and potential of collaborations between academia and activism through Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad is the projects undertaken with various civil society organisations, including Oxfam Mexico, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), Habitat International Coalition for Latin America (HIC-AL), Data Cívica, Fight Inequality Alliance, the Alliance Against Inequality, as well as UNICEF, UNESCO and several universities such as El Colegio de México and the University of Guadalajara, among others.

All of the above has cultivated a climate of trust in the Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad project, something not typically found in social media accounts that only share memes. This trust has resulted in invitations, directed either to INDESIG or directly to Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad, to present research findings in significant forums in Mexico, such as open sessions in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, as well as in government working groups focused on various research themes (fiscal justice, social programmes and redistributive policies, budget analysis, working conditions of app-based delivery workers, housing access, menstruation and gender inequalities, among others).

Even recently, in November 2022, driven by numerous comments and calls for action beyond social media, the project decided to orchestrate protests in Mexico advocating for the right to housing. The first protest occurred in Mexico City on 17 November, drawing a robust response from hundreds of attendees acting individually and various long-standing housing rights collectives in the city (Luna, 2022; Reforma, 2022; Sánchez Morales, 2022). A detailed list of demands was presented through a petition, which was received by municipal government

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authorities. Protests are ongoing at the time of writing this article, with another held in Guadalajara on 30 November and another scheduled for 6 December in Monterrey (the second and third largest cities in the country after Mexico City).



Figure 2: Protest call for the right to housing in Mexico City. Source: Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad Instagram.

As depicted in the earlier description of Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad's project evolution, collaborations between academia and activism have transcended the customary boundaries of communication and impact typically achieved by each field independently. With a clear objective and specific hypotheses (such as undermining the legitimacy of inequality through the dissemination of information), the potential for collaborations between academia and activism is substantial.

Obstacles and Challenges to the Project

As expected, Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad, like many politically charged activism projects, has encountered various criticisms almost from its inception. Among the most common are critiques from social media users who uphold meritocratic and individualistic narratives about poverty, often from a perspective distant from left-wing politics. Criticism aimed at entrepreneurs or simply at the idea of an individual understanding of poverty and wealth tends to be met with comments that suggest envy, mediocrity and laziness.

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Such responses are typical when calls for greater equality are made and are not surprising in that context. From an academic perspective, these reactions are intriguing because they illuminate how discourses and narratives that justify inequities in society operate, which is of significant interest in the field studying the legitimacy of inequality.

Conversely, when publications and analyses, whether critical or supportive, focus on actions taken by any government in Mexico or Latin America, criticisms against the project sometimes exhibit a political polarisation nuance. For example, favourable actions by the federal government of López Obrador or his party (MORENA) at the local level often prompt criticisms accusing the project of being 'funded by MORENA'. In contrast, when criticisms are directed at the federal government, other responses allege that Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad is 'funded by opponents of the MORENA government', sometimes mentioning specific entrepreneurs.

It is understandable and common that, faced with a project like Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad, grounded in academic rigour and activist strategies and enjoying broad legitimacy among a non-polarised audience, the few remaining criticisms resort to defamation and attempts to undermine legitimacy through ad-hominem fallacies. Despite these challenges, the reality is that for the project's general audience, these criticisms and false narratives are perceived as weak attempts to discredit a project with significant popular support, always aiming to distance itself from partisan biases and preferences.

Conclusion

Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad operates akin to a Trojan horse, using charming cat photos capable of viral dissemination in and of themselves to convey crucial messages and information about inequality, with the aim of dismantling legitimising beliefs. In this manner, the project exemplifies the significant potential of collaboration between academia and practitioners. Understanding the project's popularity, virality and the trust in its communicated information would be impossible without the synergy between academic and activist domains.

The dissemination of information on inequality is pivotal in debunking various myths that justify its existence, influencing how societal well-being and valuable resources are distributed. Heightened awareness of the true structural origins of poverty and wealth can prompt individuals to view the current regime of inequality as unjust, fostering greater demands for redistributive policies that may catalyse political and/or social movements.

Such objectives could not be achieved by academia alone using its historically conventional strategies, nor by activism without being firmly grounded in clear academic results.

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I hope that reflections on the specific case of Gatitos Contra la Desigualdad in Latin America and Mexico serve as an example of how one can transition from academia to activism, from digital activism to street action and, above all, from rigorous analysis using the scientific method to directly influence the improvement of the well-being of the majority. It seems to me that collaborations between academia and activism are quite natural, albeit perhaps not as frequent due to barriers that both have imposed over many years. However, it is clear that the only way to directly impact society is through integrating diverse strategies from both sides, leveraging their respective strengths, and particularly focusing on clear objectives such as reducing inequality in our societies.

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