

# Understanding public health policies in Colombia: alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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## Abstract

**Introduction:** Colombia, as a developing country, is committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the aim of improving the living conditions of its population. In this context, health has emerged as a fundamental cross-cutting axis to address all the SDGs. In this sense, an action plan supported by public health policies has been implemented with the aim of having an inclusive and equitable impact on the whole society, without distinction.

**Objective:** to understand governmental actions in health and their alignment with the SDGs and the challenges that exist for their effective implementation in Colombia.

**Materials and methods:** the methodology employed in this study was qualitative in nature, using documentary review and analysis as the main approach. The materials included an exhaustive review of relevant literature and public policy documents related to health.

**Results:** the findings derived from the analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Colombia highlight a significant commitment on the part of the country to promote sustainable and equitable development. Remarkable progress is observed in the implementation of strategies and policies aimed at improving the health and well-being of the population, as well as addressing environmental and social challenges.

**Conclusions:** Despite present challenges, such as resource scarcity, deficiencies in health infrastructure and social disparities, Colombia has consid-

erable potential to move towards sustainable development that ensures the well-being of its entire population. The connection between health and the Sustainable Development Goals in Colombia constitutes a unique opportunity to positively transform the country's reality and progress towards a more prosperous and sustainable future for current and future generations.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, Health Governance, Social Determinants of Health, Public Policy, Health Policy

## Resumen

**Introducción:** Colombia, en calidad de país en vía de desarrollo, se ha comprometido con la consecución de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) con el propósito de mejorar las condiciones de vida de su población. En este contexto, la salud ha emergido como un eje transversal fundamental para abordar todos los ODS. En este sentido, se ha implementado un plan de acción respaldado por políticas públicas de salud con el objetivo de impactar de manera inclusiva y equitativa a toda la sociedad, sin distinción alguna.

**Objetivo:** comprender las acciones gubernamentales en materia de salud y su alineación con los ODS y los desafíos que existen para su implementación efectiva en Colombia.

**Materiales y métodos:** la metodología empleada en este estudio fue de naturaleza cualitativa, utilizando la revisión y análisis documental como enfoque principal. Los materiales incluyeron una revisión exhaustiva de la literatura relevante y documentos de políticas públicas relacionados con la salud.

**Resultados:** los hallazgos derivados del análisis de los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) en Colombia destacan un compromiso significativo por parte del país en la promoción de un desarrollo sostenible y equitativo. Se observa un progreso notable en la implementación de estrategias y políticas dirigidas a mejorar la salud y el bienestar de la población, así como a abordar desafíos ambientales y sociales.

**Conclusiones:** a pesar de los desafíos presentes, como la escasez de recursos, las deficiencias en la infraestructura de salud y las disparidades sociales, Colombia posee un potencial considerable para avanzar hacia un desarrollo sostenible que asegure el bienestar de toda su población. La conexión entre la salud y los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible en Colombia constituye una oportunidad única para transformar de manera positiva la

realidad del país y progresar hacia un porvenir más próspero y sostenible para las actuales y futuras generaciones.

**Palabras clave:** Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS), gobernanza, determinantes sociales de la salud, política pública, política de salud.

## Introduction

At the confluence between health and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Colombia, there is fertile ground for progress and equity. The intersection of these two vital aspects is not only relevant, but crucial for the sustainable future of the country. The objective of this article is to understand governmental actions in health and their alignment with the SDGs and the challenges that exist for their effective implementation in Colombia in order to move towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the country.

The well-being and health of the population are fundamental pillars in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Colombia. From the eradication of poverty to the promotion of a healthy life and well-being for all, health stands as a cross-cutting element that directly impacts multiple areas of sustainable development (1). Public health policies, therefore, play a crucial role in the materialization of these objectives.

Public health policies in Colombia play a significant role in promoting an inclusive, efficient and equitable health system, in line with the SDGs. Ensuring universal access to quality health services, disease prevention, promotion of healthy lifestyles and reduction of health inequalities are essential components in moving towards sustainable development in the country (2-3).

In the face of current and future challenges, it is imperative that Colombia strengthens its commitment to health and the Sustainable Development Goals. The implementation of comprehensive policies, investment in health infrastructure, and the promotion of citizen participation are key actions to achieve sustainable development that guarantee the well-being of present and future generations.

The relationship between health and the Sustainable Development Goals in Colombia is complex but vital for the social, economic and environmental progress of the country. Only through a holistic approach that prioritizes health as a fundamental right and the SDGs as a framework for strategic action, will it be possible to build a sustainable and equitable future for all of Colombian society (4).

Based on a theoretical perspective, the literature review highlights the need to address health as a key factor in the achievement of the SDGs. In Colombia, this approach becomes even more important due to the diversity of social, economic and geographic realities faced by the country.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal call to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure peace and prosperity by 2030 (5). They are divided into 17 interconnected SDGs, recognizing that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must be socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. These goals are committed to prioritizing the progress of those furthest behind to cover the entire population.

Achieving the SDGs requires creativity, knowledge, technology and financial resources from all of society in each of the territories committed to achieving the goal by 2030. To comply with the guideline, Colombia developed a strategy for the implementation of the SDGs throughout the national territory in the CONPES document (3918) “this document establishes the goals and strategies for the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs in Colombia. It generates a roadmap for each of the established goals, including indicators, responsible entities and the resources required to bring them to fruition” (6).

On the other hand, to understand the development of this article, it is necessary to understand some concepts that according to VHL (7) are defined as follows:

**Governance:** “the exercise of authority, control, administration, governing power, or the manner in which power is exercised in the administration of a country’s social and economic resources for development, which implies the capacity of governments to design, formulate and implement policies and perform functions” (8).

**Social determinants of health (socioeconomic context):** “the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, as well as the systems that are used to treat disease. These circumstances are, in turn, shaped by a broader set of forces: economic, political, social, and political” (9).

**Public policy:** “a course or method of action generally selected by the government, among several alternatives, to guide and determine present and future decisions. 2) Population policy: Decisions and actions taken by

the public authorities, to guide and usually determine present and future decisions that influence demographic variables” (10).

**Health policies:** “decisions generally made by government policymakers in defining the immediate and future objectives of the health system” (11).

Considering the definitions of each category, it is essential to recognize that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) must be adapted to the governmental structure of each nation committed to these goals. In addition, it is crucial to understand that the health of a population is intrinsically linked to its social determinants, an aspect widely contemplated in the 17 SDGs. In this sense, the public policies adopted by each country not only shape the lives of their citizens but also have a direct impact on the effectiveness of health systems and, therefore, on the overall well-being of the population.

### **Materials**

A comprehensive analysis of public policies and health programs in Colombia was conducted in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). To this end, government strategies, national health plans, as well as relevant progress reports and program evaluations were reviewed in detail. This analysis provided an in-depth understanding of how government health actions align with the SDGs and what challenges exist for their effective implementation.

A rigorous process of data collection and analysis was carried out in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the health and sustainable development landscape in Colombia. A variety of research methods, including document review, academic literature and public policies, and statistical analysis, were used to critically examine relevant indicators and assess progress towards the SDGs in the country.

### **Method**

The methodological approach used was qualitative through documentary review and analysis. The procedures employed to conduct a comprehensive review of relevant literature, examine public policy documents related to health, and carry out the collection and analysis of relevant statistical data. These methods allowed for a comprehensive assessment of Colombia’s progress in achieving the health-related SDGs and provide a solid basis for the interpretation of the results obtained in the study.

## Results

The results of the documentary review and analysis reveal Colombia's strong leadership in the implementation of international agendas, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate change, reflecting a solid commitment to sustainable development at the global level. The country has outlined detailed goals and strategies to achieve the 2030 Agenda, establishing a roadmap that includes specific indicators, responsible entities and necessary resources. Noteworthy is the implementation of the Strategy for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Colombia, through CONPES 3918, with the active participation of various stakeholders, such as civil society, the private sector, academia and international organizations (12).

Emphasis is placed on the adoption of Results-Oriented Public Management (GPOR) as a comprehensive approach, highlighting the relevance of strategic planning, budget programming, as well as monitoring and evaluation of results. We recognize the need to improve the production of information and monitoring of progress in the implementation of the SDGs for informed decision making.

Likewise, it underscores the importance of cooperation and multi-stakeholder participation, including civil society and the private sector, to address complex challenges in a collaborative manner (13). This highlights the importance of inter-institutional collaboration and effective follow-up to achieve the sustainable development goals, especially in the health sector in Colombia.

For this reason, the Ten-Year Public Health Plan 2022-2031 was established, which is aligned with the SDGs related to the end of poverty, zero hunger, health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, among others, promoting an equitable and inclusive public policy that leaves no one behind and restores the fundamental right to health of the most vulnerable populations that have been abandoned by the state for so long, as well as building a solid health program to improve coverage and conditions throughout the national territory (14).

Significant progress in the implementation of the 2030 agenda in Colombia is evident, reflecting considerable progress compared to previous years. Currently, the country registers an overall progress of 60.2%, with

67.8% compliance with respect to the annual target of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Good progress has been made in SDGs 17, 14 and 12, while SDGs 7, 1 and 10 are lagging behind. It is essential to strengthen partnerships for development, improve diversified financing and encourage the active participation of communities in the implementation of the SDGs (15).

The need to meticulously review targets and indicators for accurate follow-up and adjusted to the country’s reality is highlighted. The Mention is made of the existence of a monitoring and reporting scheme established under CONPES 3918 of 2018, which includes the identification of indicators, national targets and protocols for reporting information.

The Management Report 2022 of the Ministry of Health and Social Protection reveals the outstanding results of the actions undertaken during the year. It emphasizes the priority approach to issues such as digital health, territorial planning in health and the promotion of healthy environments, along with the implementation of the Ten-Year Public Health Plan 2022-2031 (16). In addition, the crucial role of Data Analytics to address fundamental challenges of the health system is recognized.

A comparative table is presented which indicates the before and after intervention of public health policies including the SDGs in Colombia:

**Table 1.** Comparative chart before and after the SDGs

| Indicator                      | Before the Policy | After Policy            | Gender equity |       | Observed Change                   |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------|-------|-----------------------------------|
|                                |                   |                         | F             | M     |                                   |
| Health coverage                | 94.6%             | 95.9%                   | 96.5%         | 95.4% | Increased                         |
| Health expenditure as % of GDP | 7.3%              | 6.53%                   |               |       | Decreased                         |
| Quality of life                | 23.1%             | 47.3%                   |               |       | Increased                         |
| Infant mortality               | 1.4%              | 2.7%                    |               |       | Increased                         |
| Premature mortality            | 48.0%             | 48.5%                   |               |       | Increased                         |
| Maternal mortality             | 62.83%            | 50.82%                  |               |       | Decreased                         |
| Promotion of healthy lifestyle | N/A               | 1.228.484 people served |               |       | Positive impact on the population |

Source: Own elaboration

The report demonstrates the Ministry’s commitment to leading initiatives aimed at improving quality and equity in the provision of health services, strengthening social protection and managing human talent in the health

sector. It highlights the achievements in the implementation of transformative policies and the promotion of citizen participation in the formulation of health plans and policies.

Regarding the financing of the General Social Security Health System (SGSSS), Law 1955 of 2019 ensures the current financing of this system, which is essential to improve access and quality of health in Colombia. This financial backing provides a solid foundation to address challenges in the health sector and move towards meeting the SDGs related to wellness and universal health care (17).

The “Al Hospital” program under the wellbeing SDG is a comprehensive initiative that seeks to improve infrastructure, equipment and information systems in hospitals in strategic areas in Colombia. The primary objective of this approach is to optimize efficiency in the provision of health services, carrying out concrete actions to achieve higher standards of medical care (17).

In line with this vision, the National Government has established 16 goals in document CONPES 3918, focusing on health and well-being as fundamental pillars to achieve the 2030 Agenda. These goals outline a clear path towards the continuous improvement of the health system, covering crucial aspects such as the reduction of maternal and infant mortality, the fight against communicable and non-communicable diseases, as well as the achievement of universal health coverage by 2030.

The Strategic Sector Plan is an essential reference framework, outlining a series of priorities and strategic actions to strengthen the health system in Colombia. These actions include the definition of priorities in public health and rights, the strengthening of the steering role and governance in health, the improvement of infrastructure and the provision of health services, the formulation of agreements for the quality of work in health, efficiency in spending and the generation of new financial resources, as well as institutional strengthening through the optimization of processes and the development of human and technological talent (18).

The results presented reflect the commitment of the Ministry of Health and the High Level Interinstitutional Commission to continue strengthening the health system in Colombia (19). Priority is given to equity, quality and sustainability in the provision of health services for the entire population, which is evidence of Colombia’s commitment to meeting the goals of the SDGs and its concern for the well-being of its citizens (20).

The relevance of the SDGs to ensure environmental, social and economic



sustainability, with an inclusive approach that seeks to leave no one behind. It highlights opportunities to improve the quality of life of the population and ensure environmental sustainability, highlighting the need to promote sustainable practices and responsible consumption (21). The importance of both individual and collective responsibility in achieving the SDGs and sustainable development in Colombia should be highlighted.

Out-of-pocket spending on health represents a significant burden for households in Latin America and the Caribbean, exacerbating inequity and the lack of financial protection, especially among the most vulnerable groups (22). There is an urgent need to increase public spending on health to reduce these inequalities and promote universal access to health services, especially in times of crisis and pandemic.

In Colombia, there has been a considerable increase in the number of hospitals that have joined the Global Green Hospital Network, indicating a growing commitment to sustainability in the health sector. Although progress has been made in waste, energy and water management, there is still ample potential for improvement, especially in areas such as environmental leadership (23). The fact that only a small percentage of institutions are accredited in this network underscores the need to continue promoting sustainable practices to reduce the carbon footprint and move towards the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are of vital importance for Colombia's future, emphasizing sustainability in its environmental, social and economic dimensions. It recognizes the imperative need to adopt sustainable practices and responsible consumption to improve the quality of life and ensure that no one is left behind, highlighting the shared responsibility in implementing the SDGs to achieve sustainable development in the country.

Although countries in the Americas, including Colombia, have committed to improve environmental, social and economic indicators to achieve the SDGs by 2030, there are significant challenges in identifying and consolidating target indicators. This generates uncertainty about the fulfillment of the SDGs. In Colombia, despite the autonomy to develop strategies, gaps persist in the integration of these indicators, which demands constant monitoring and evaluation to ensure sustainable development in the region (24).

It is essential to continue strengthening health information systems globally for informed and effective decision-making in public health, thus seeking a healthier, safer and more equitable world (25).

These results reflect the commitment of the UN in Colombia to improve the health of the population, promote equity in access to health services and contribute to the strengthening of the country's health system (26). It highlights the importance of strengthening health information systems globally for informed and effective decision-making in public health, with a view to achieving a healthier, safer and more equitable world (27). These findings underscore the imperative need to monitor and evaluate the progress of countries in implementing the SDGs to achieve sustainable development in the region.

In conclusion, the results obtained from the analysis of the SDGs in Colombia reflect a significant commitment on the part of the country in the search for sustainable and equitable development. Considerable progress is evident in the implementation of strategies and policies aimed at improving the health and well-being of the population, as well as addressing environmental and social challenges.

However, important challenges remain, such as high out-of-pocket spending on health, the need to strengthen environmental sustainability in the health sector, and the urgency of improving health information systems for more informed decision making. It is essential that Colombia continues to work in collaboration with diverse stakeholders and strengthen its policies and actions in line with the SDGs to achieve comprehensive sustainable development and ensure a prosperous and healthy future for all its citizens.

### **Discussion**

The analysis of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Colombia reveals a number of challenges and opportunities in the health sector. While the country has demonstrated a strong commitment to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, significant obstacles remain, such as high out-of-pocket spending on health and the need to improve environmental sustainability in the health system. Participation in initiatives such as the Global Green Hospital Network is encouraging, but more effort is required to ensure that all institutions adopt sustainable practices.

In addition, the need to strengthen health information systems and constantly assess progress in implementing the SDGs is crucial to achieve sustainable and equitable development in the region. Continued collaboration between government, civil society and other stakeholders is needed to overcome these challenges and move towards a healthier and more sustainable future for all.

To achieve a real impact on the health of the population and the fulfillment of the SDGs, it is essential that public policies focus on strengthening health systems, ensuring equitable access to quality services and promoting disease prevention. The active participation of various stakeholders, both at the governmental and civil society levels, is key in this transformation process.

In this sense, the promotion of healthy lifestyles, the reduction of inequalities in access to health services and the integration of intersectoral approaches are fundamental aspects to consider in the planning and implementation of concrete actions that contribute to the achievement of the health-related SDGs in Colombia.

Despite existing challenges, such as lack of resources, gaps in health infrastructure and social inequities, Colombia has great potential to move towards sustainable development that ensures the well-being of its entire population. Innovation, collaboration and political will are determining factors in this path towards a healthier and more equitable future for all.

In summary, the connection between health and the Sustainable Development Goals in Colombia represents a unique opportunity to positively transform the country's reality and move towards a more prosperous and sustainable future for present and future generations.

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