

Ecuador's National Surgical Strengthening Plan: first in Latin America, provides hope for surgical care agenda

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Suggested citation Hyman GY, Salamea JC, Gerk A, Kumar N, Wurdeman T, Park KB et al. Ecuador's National Surgical Strengthening Plan: first in Latin America, provides hope for surgical care agenda. *Rev Panam Salud Publica.* 2024;48:e22. <https://doi.org/10.26633/RPSP.2024.22>

To the Editor:

Since 2015, there has been a notable increase in global efforts by various stakeholders to promote and advance surgical care policies, as proposed by the Lancet Commission on Global Surgery (LCoGS) namely, the development of the National Surgical Obstetric Anesthesia Planning (NSOAP), a country-driven framework that offers a comprehensive approach to health ministries to enhance their surgical systems.¹ These plans are strategically designed for integration into national health policies, ensuring the development, implementation, and monitoring of surgical capacity.² The NSOAP addresses six key health system components: infrastructure, service delivery, information management, workforce, financing, and governance. This momentum has led to the promotion of NSOAPs in over 40 countries, with 11 having fully completed their plans. A significant advancement was the publication of the NSOAP Manual in 2022, followed by a Spanish translation, amidst Ecuador's version of an NSOAP, the National Surgery Strengthening Plan (NSSP; *Plan de Fortalecimiento Quirúrgico Nacional*).¹ Ecuador's NSSP exemplifies the framework's strategic and scalable integration into national policies.

Ecuador has affirmed its position as a leading advocate for surgical care in Latin America. Following a two-year process, Ecuador is the first country in the Region of the Americas to launch an NSSP as a key component of a robust health system, including improving emergency responsiveness and preparedness.⁴ With 365 million Latin Americans lacking access to essential surgical care, an urgent regional response is needed.³ Ecuador has called upon the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and its member states to recognize the need to fortify surgical health systems in the region.⁴ Failure to do so

poses a significant threat to the population's overall health and economic productivity. These efforts gained widespread recognition for embedding surgical infrastructure development within multilateral health organizations' core public health priorities, most notably PAHO, and reaffirming the country's steadfast commitment to achieving the targets outlined in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁵

Ecuador's dedication to strengthening surgical care systems extends to the international stage. During the 75th Session of the Regional Committee of the World Health Organization (WHO) for the Americas, held in Washington D.C., United States of America, from September 25th to 29th, 2023, the government of Ecuador advocated for the inclusion of surgical system strengthening in the agenda for 2024 and led a side event convening international experts to better understand the political and financial challenges and how to overcome them in the Region.⁵ This initiative reinforces Ecuador's commitment to advancing surgical care within its borders and across the Americas. Ecuador's national surgical plan is a testament to the power of collaboration and political advocacy in action to shape the future of health systems, within its borders and across the region.

On November 13th, 2023, Ecuador formally launched the national plan to strengthen surgical care delivery. The plan integrates surgical system strengthening into its health, climate, and emergency preparedness agenda. Moreover, in Ecuador, the plan aligns with the three strategic objectives proposed in the Ten-year Health Plan 2022-2031 ("Plan Decenal de Salud de Ecuador"): 1) Equity in health; 2) Timely and quality care; and 3) Integrated and efficient health system, in addition to four key population health priorities: 1) maternal and child health, 2) non-communicable diseases,

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3) trauma and injury, and 4) climate change. This policy comes at a critical time—as the region prepares for the El Niño Phenomenon—with a focus on health systems strategic planning to address broader national priorities. Surgical system strengthening is an indivisible component of national security and emergency preparedness. Ecuador's ground-breaking initiative encourages regional governments to adopt a similar integrated approach towards health system

strengthening, achieving the SDGs, and universal health coverage.

Conflict of interests. None declared.

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Manuscript received on 26 February 2024. Accepted for publication on 29 February 2024. Not peer-review.