

The Sustainable Development Goals: A Strategic Vision from the Prevention of Occupational Risks in Colombia

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This text arises from the project of the Autonomous University of Chihuahua, "Development and evaluation of a gluten-free bread with reduce calorie intake."

Introduction

University of Zaragoza (2024) states that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Global Goals, represent a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. These 17 Goals build upon the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals, while incorporating new areas such as climate change, economic inequality, innovation, sustainable consumption, peace, and justice, among other priorities.

Colombia, like many other countries, is committed to implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Within this framework, particular emphasis has been placed on plans aimed at safeguarding employee well-being and safety, as established in the United Nations 2030 Agenda. Specifically, within the context of sustainable development and the prevention of occupational risks, there is now a growing discourse on equity through the inclusion of such factors within the labour sphere. In line with this plan, it is therefore appropriate to address these aspects when planning and executing related initiatives.

It is important to understand that Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) is not only a strategic factor that enables organisations to protect their human capital, mitigate risks in their value chain, increase productivity, and ensure business continuity, but also a key tool for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals set by the United Nations (UN). For instance, Goal 1 (End poverty in all its forms everywhere), Goal 3 (Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages), Goal 4 (Ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities), and Goal 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all). In this regard, the persistent lack of decent work opportunities, insufficient investment, and low consumption undermine the basic social contract that underpins democratic societies. The creation of quality jobs remains a significant challenge for nearly all of the country's economies (Red Pacto Global Colombiano, 2022)

Furthermore, the implementation of the SDGs in Colombia has entailed significant efforts to improve working conditions and promote a safe and healthy working environment, integrating the SDGs into the action plan for their achievement. It is therefore appropriate to highlight the importance of implementing this plan and the extent to which the learning and internalisation of the SDGs influence organisational practice and the daily operations of enterprises.

Figure 1. The SDGs Agenda 2030. Source: UN, 2015.



Goals

In the current context of the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda 2030 applied to organizations as a strategy in Occupational Risk Prevention in Colombia, this research focuses on the need to analyze and understand the actions implemented by companies in terms of sustainability, decent work and occupational safety for the integrity of workers' health.

To comprehensively understand how these preventive actions influence the improvement of working conditions and the culture of self-care in Colombian organizational contexts, we seek to carry out a systematic review of scientific and organizational bibliographic sources that allows exploring the regulatory frameworks and intersectoral alliances related to Occupational Risk Prevention in the fulfillment of sustainability in safe work environments.

Sustainable Development Goal 1: No Poverty – End poverty in all its forms everywhere

In Colombia, the most recent census report from National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 2025) on monetary poverty in 2024 reveals a dual panorama: the percentage of people living in multidimensional poverty at the national level was 11.5%; in urban areas, it was 7.8%, while in rural and scattered regions, it reached 24.3%. This means that the percentage of people in multidimensional poverty in rural and dispersed areas was 3.1 times higher than in urban areas. This contrast highlights a general improvement in the economy and employment that failed to benefit the entire population equally, especially the most vulnerable groups in rural areas. Job creation and economic growth contributed to the reduction of monetary poverty; however, inflation, which reached 5.20%, significantly affected the most vulnerable social classes, thus limiting the positive impact of these economic advances (Moreno Saldoval, 2023).

Colombian companies, as Pelekais & Ortega (2020) note, are becoming increasingly aware of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) and are committed to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, they strive to fulfil SDG 1, which aims to eradicate poverty in all its forms. Through Occupational Risk Prevention (ORP) and Occupational Health and Safety, they have significantly contributed to poverty reduction by improving working conditions and promoting access to safe and healthy jobs, which in turn increases individual income levels. It is important to remember that a vast number of informal workers are employed in precarious, unhealthy,

and unsafe conditions, with no social protection. Therefore, the formalisation of employment in terms of occupational safety and health is a key strategy to ensure that the country's workforce benefits from decent working conditions and access to social security, fostering a more inclusive, fair, and equitable labour market (González *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, it is essential to consider that deaths and disabilities resulting from hazardous work activities are a significant cause of poverty, as affected families lose the productive capacity of their members, thereby setting back social progress and deepening inequality in access to opportunities.

Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being – Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

The practical implementation of Occupational Risk Prevention has a significant impact on achieving Sustainable Development Goal 3, which focuses on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. The role of ORP and Occupational Health and Safety in achieving this goal is centred on health and well-being within organisations. It has been essential for ensuring safe working environments and improving the well-being of workers and communities.

Internally, companies implement a range of measures to support this goal, such as establishing health and safety management systems across all their facilities and requiring their suppliers to do the same, in order to reduce occupational accidents and illnesses throughout the value chain (Castañeda *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, companies adopt effective safety and hygiene protocols for their products and services to prevent negative health effects for consumers, offer regular health and safety training to employees, limit or eliminate the use of hazardous chemicals, and promote a healthy lifestyle among staff.

On the other hand, considering the need to strengthen measures to protect the health of members across the supply chain, Colombia aims to move towards renewable energies to reduce air pollution, manage energy consumption by promoting sustainable mobility, balance healthcare costs concerning employees' wages, and improve the nutritional quality of food and beverages in the agri-food sector to provide healthier options for consumers (Rodríguez-Guevara *et al.*, 2024).

Enterprises have various tools at their disposal to facilitate their contribution to SDG 3, which centres on health and well-being. These include applying the national regulatory framework, such as Law 1562 of 2012 and Decree 1072 of 2015, which establish guidelines for preventing occupational risks. Additionally, companies can implement occupational health and safety management systems, participate in training programmes, seek specialised advisory services, join business networks dedicated to promoting occupational health, and take advantage of incentives and recognitions offered by the government and other entities. These are all fundamental measures for ensuring safe work environments and promoting the well-being of workers in the country (Ministerio de Trabajo, 2015).

Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education – Ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Through the National Ten-Year Education Plan 2016–2026, the Colombian government aims to enhance the quality of the education system, foster the country's economic and social development, and build a society grounded in justice, equity, respect, and the recognition of diversity. Its mission is to guarantee the right to education, considering the cultural and territorial diversity of the country, while eliminating the barriers imposed by citizens' socioeconomic conditions (MEN, 2017).

It is essential to note that, like other Latin American countries, Colombia is facing the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly those related to the continuity of educational trajectories for children and adolescents, as well as the reintegration of those whose schooling was interrupted. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing social inequalities and systemic issues, but it also presents an opportunity to rethink and transform national education systems towards greater equity and inclusion. This transformation involves leveraging technological and pedagogical innovations, as well as the commitment of educational communities and the efforts made during this unprecedented period, thereby contributing to the collective commitment to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Rueda & Coronell, 2024).

In Colombia, several companies have taken on the challenge of contributing to SDG 4 by implementing educational programmes. For instance, companies in the electricity, gas, steam, and air conditioning supply sectors support early childhood education programmes, demonstrating their commitment to equitable early development (Gallego Navarro, 2019).

Various factors associated with the fulfilment of SDG 4 reveal that the impact of the pandemic on education exposes a profound crisis that directly affects the development of both basic and advanced skills among the population. The loss of learning and the lack of access to education have serious implications for the labour market and, consequently, for Occupational Health and Safety. Inequality in access to higher education, particularly among low-income groups, perpetuates a cycle of poverty and low-quality employment. These workers are often exposed to more hazardous and less regulated working conditions, which increases the risks of occupational accidents and diseases. The lack of social mobility, despite the increased access to education, suggests that many workers are not acquiring the necessary skills to access safer and better-paid jobs (FUNDEPS, 2021).

In this context, it can be inferred that improving the quality and equity of the education system has a direct impact on occupational risk prevention and OHS. Educational programmes that integrate training in occupational health and safety from early stages can better prepare future workers to identify and mitigate occupational risks. Likewise, quality education that is accessible to all can contribute to a more skilled workforce that is aware of the importance of OHS, thereby reducing the incidence of accidents and work-related illnesses.

Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth – Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all

Sustainable Development Goal 8, focused on Decent Work and Economic Growth, advocates for inclusive and sustainable economic development, as well as the promotion of employment and decent working conditions for all. It aims to foster steady, inclusive, and sustainable growth by ensuring full and productive employment, as well as decent work, for all individuals. This goal aims to reduce unemployment rates, improve working conditions, and increase productivity, with a particular focus on protecting labour rights and ensuring safe working environments for all, including migrants and those in precarious employment, especially migrant women (López-Mera, 2020). Target 8.8 of SDG 8, which centres on Labour Rights and Safe Workplaces, aims to protect workers' rights and promote workplaces free from occupational hazards. This includes the rigorous implementation of Occupational Health and Safety regulations, the development of voluntary initiatives, and the constant updating of laws and systems related to OHS. Such measures not only encourage the creation of decent jobs and labour formalisation but also safeguard workers' rights and guarantee risk-free working environments. Moreover, they contribute to the eradication of forced labour and other forms of labour exploitation, such as human trafficking (Álvarez Duque *et al.*, 2023).

In Colombia, companies across various sectors are taking significant steps towards meeting SDG 8, which seeks to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. In the agricultural, livestock, hunting, forestry, and fishing sectors, corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are geared towards supporting local suppliers, thereby fostering national economic growth. This approach not only strengthens the local economy but also empowers communities by generating employment opportunities and supporting sustainable production (Gallego Navarro, 2019). This support is crucial for the development of new enterprises and the creation of employment, making a significant contribution to achieving SDG 8. Likewise, financial and insurance activities are linked to the creation of jobs and alternative sources of income for low-income families through collaboration with foundations and civil society organisations. This collaborative approach enhances social and economic inclusion, promoting more equitable and sustainable growth (López-Mera, 2020). Companies in Colombia play a crucial role in the country's economic development, accounting for the majority of employment and production. These companies, committed to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, have adopted sustainable practices that address global challenges such as poverty, hunger, and pollution. Corporate Social Responsibility and Occupational Health and Safety are key elements of their strategies, enhancing both their public image and the well-being of their employees and the communities they serve. In this way, they make a significant contribution to more equitable and sustainable development in Colombia. The Colombian regulatory framework, as represented by Law 1562 of 2012 and Decree 1072 of 2015, provides clear guidelines for preventing occupational risks. These laws have enabled companies to implement health and safety practices more effectively, thereby reducing occupational risks and promoting safer working environments.

Conclusions

The implementation of OHS policies and programmes within the existing regulatory framework in Colombia has not only helped to prevent workplace accidents and occupational diseases. However, it has also promoted healthier working environments, increasing productivity and the overall well-being of workers. Therefore, the promotion of OHS can drive sustainable economic development by reducing the costs associated with workplace accidents and occupational illnesses. Companies that invest in safe and healthy working conditions tend to experience lower rates of absenteeism and staff turnover, which in turn enhances operational efficiency and competitiveness. In this way, OHS benefits not only workers but also has a positive impact on the economy as a whole. Occupational Risk Prevention and Occupational Health and Safety in Colombia have played a significant role in achieving SDGs 3 and 4. These strategies have greatly improved the health and well-being of workers, as well as the quality of education in the country. Nevertheless, challenges remain that must be addressed in order to maximise the impact of these initiatives and ensure a more sustainable and equitable future.

Integrating Occupational Risk Prevention into the framework of the 2030 Agenda is essential for advancing towards global, sustainable, and equitable development. OHS is crucial for ensuring safe and healthy working conditions, which not only protect the lives and well-being of workers but also drive productivity and economic stability. By reducing the incidence of workplace accidents and occupational illnesses, the associated costs of medical care, compensation, and productivity loss are lowered, thereby freeing up resources that can be invested in other social and economic development programmes.

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