

PILARES
Year 1 in Reflection



I. Introduction to PILARES

Programa Ecuador PILARES (PILARES) is a three-year USAID funded program designed as a flexible, rapid response mechanism to foster shared responsibility to address citizen security realities in Ecuador. PILARES facilitates coordination on citizen security between the government, civil society and communities, as well as to increase grassroots and non-government participation in citizen led initiatives.

In April 2023, PILARES began operations in an environment of excessive crime, municipal and provincial elections, and persistent national insecurity. Following an assassination of a presidential candidate in August 2023, Ecuadorians elected Daniel Noboa as the President for the 2023-2025 transition period. Noboa took office in November with a promise of building “a New Ecuador”, a pledge to reduce violence and improve safety for all. This has proven to be a unique window of opportunity to advance citizen security nationwide by leveraging the administration’s prioritization of localization through municipal government action and engaging with influential community associations to generate attention and commitment at every level. By working with diverse partners across government, civil society, and the private sector, PILARES is building consensus and supporting active participation in citizen security activities as a collective responsibility.

Rapidly accelerating crime and violence in Ecuador has prompted reflection and reaction across the country’s institutions. Local government, despite limited resources and reliance on national policies and funding, is gradually playing a more active role in prevention and enforcement. However, security policy and planning are subject to the same challenges that municipalities commonly face including limited budget, coordination difficulties among state entities, and public sector bureaucracy. These challenges are magnified when considering security concerns given the rapidly evolving problem set, the number of actors involved, and the lack of tested solutions. The ‘easiest’ and most visible responses often result in increased law enforcement, but governments are increasingly recognizing that a response that includes prevention and social investment is necessary. PILARES is supporting the Government of Ecuador in its effort to reconstruct public safety, improve coordination, reduce administrative burdens and most importantly, mobilize citizen input.

One year into implementation, the program has navigated a three-month State of Emergency and a national referendum, including seven security related questions posed to the voters. Amidst unprecedented levels of violence, prison riots, and increased military presence, PILARES had made significant traction at the national, municipal and community level, shaping inclusive and holistic citizen security initiatives across a diverse portfolio of activities.

Heading into year two, here are a few takeaways we’ve learned thus far.



II. Citizen Security has many faces

Citizen security is a broad and far-reaching concept – on purpose. It is meant to capture wide ranging interventions, from national level military exercises to peace education within elementary schools. A comprehensive citizen security program requires investments in traditional governance and creative co-design, including tailored and nuanced approaches, careful stakeholder dialogue and identification of driving factors of violence in each geography.

For example, PILARES is helping to articulate how citizen security activities compliment public safety initiatives, as a more integrative approach to community protection. Rather than a reliance on increasing police presence and surveillance equipment, PILARES is designing alternative avenues to drive unique, community led solutions and invest in public institutions capacity building to shift the perception of public safety.

III. Diversity of intervention is key

Working hand in hand with government and non-government

- Local governments often struggle with fulfilling their citizen security objectives due to a common misperception that security is exclusively a central government function. As such, PILARES has built productive partnerships with several municipal and provincial governments to design and implement citizen security plans unique to their region, requiring local consultation and buy in. To date, PILARES has developed 19 Municipal Citizen Security Plans, 10 Provincial Security Plans and 3 Tourism Safety Plans to elevate social investments, prevent violence and strengthen institutions, highlighting the collaborative, multi-sector reality of citizen security infrastructure. This practical policy plan helps to build a transparent and accountable environment for citizen security to develop outside of the traditional public safety model, outlining roles and responsibilities of non-enforcement actors.
- Activity Highlight: PILARES supported the development of tailored “Peaceful Coexistence and Citizen Security Plans” to the municipal government and for all seven cantons (regions) of Esmeraldas, gaining positive responses by local authorities having accurately ‘diagnosed’ the reality of each canton and their needs in terms of citizen security. These documents will serve as a foundational tool with guidelines and lines of action for each municipality to build initiatives and design local public policies on citizen security, based on their geographic, institutional, legal, demographic, budgetary, social, and economic conditions.

- The private sector has also emerged as an important non-government, non-traditional partner in this space, particularly given the persistent extortion rates across the country. Crime and intimidation continue to greatly challenge economic growth and business success, undermining small businesses and multinational companies alike. For example, the online portal Ecuador Chequea reported that formal extortion complaints have grown by 470% in the last three years. A survey conducted by the Quito Chamber of Commerce indicated 90% of its members claim their businesses have been exposed to insecurity, while 40% have been direct victims of crime in the last 12 months resulting in a drop in sales by 30-40%. As such, private sector actors have growing interest in combatting this phenomenon to generate more peacetime business opportunities.
- PILARES is supporting linkages between business actors and entrepreneurs to strengthen their coordination efforts, update respective security protocols, and reimagine public spaces like parks through innovative rehabilitation ideas. PILARES private sector partners represent another important segment of society that can contribute to holistic and collaborative citizen security policymaking and oversight, in addition to government led initiatives.

Both short term response and long-term investment

- When the State of Emergency was declared in January 2024, PILARES sprang into action. Within 24 hours, PILARES designed an ‘info-a-thon’ to provide critical information to citizens throughout the weekend. In times of such upheaval and uncertainty, the national population benefits from clear insights into government decision making and consequences on social and political life.
- Activity highlight: The Citizen Security Plan of the Municipality of Quito implemented by the Security Secretariat, prioritizes within one of its axes, supporting youth in vulnerable situations. Within this component of the plan, the main goal is to design interventions that facilitate violence prevention. USAID PILARES supported the Security Secretariat in operationalizing activity priorities, including over 300 football (soccer) associations in conflict resolution curriculum for both youth and football coaches. This activity developed a violence prevention curriculum through sports which was applied in a soccer tournament.
- To augment government strategic planning, PILARES also supported the development of coordination tools and standard operating procedures to inform government response to insecurity. These critical governance tools will ensure longer term capability for evidence-based policy making to address






violence and crime, as a complement to other strategic communications and public engagement activities. For example, one such tool is reestablishing neighborhood (barrio) committees and the Municipal Councils of Citizen Security and Social Coexistence, comprised of government, private sector, and other institutions to institutionalize shared responsibility and interconnectivity.

Physical tools and softer solutions

- Citizen security requires both ‘hard’ infrastructure and ‘soft’ social investment as complementary tools. For example, PILARES has delivered and installed nearly 60 community alarms across three geographies. These tools reinvigorate a fundamental sense of safety and enables participation across the community.
- Activity Highlight: In Guayas, cantons have been experiencing a steady increase of violence over the last few years. Despite dedicated efforts by municipal government and national police, security continues to deteriorate. In response, PILARES supported a pilot project to install thirty community alarms and reactivate neighborhood security committees in three priority areas, thereby strengthening prevention and response mechanisms in the region. This relatively simple solution demonstrates the value of corresponding actions between local government, civil society and community leaders in addressing citizen security priorities. Community alarms help foster coordination between the Municipality and community committees, and improve information sharing within communities on safety, self-protection and participation in addressing collective security issues.
- Facilitating social cohesion and conflict mitigation with youth provides another avenue of citizen engagement and reinforcing peaceful coexistence. Following the recently released Quito Metropolitan Plan for Security and Citizen Coexistence 2023 – 2027, PILARES is engaging soccer coaches in a socio-educational curriculum to integrate violence prevention within youth leagues to reach broader audiences. As Quito alone has over 300 soccer associations, it is an important part of social life, representing a space of enormous power and a social structure with a high capacity for community participation. By weaving peace principles, conflict resolution and social cohesion strategies into coaching, this activity is mobilizing more community members to proactively pursue peace, even through sport.

PILARES and Palladium will continue to reflect on what’s working in building momentum within the national, municipal and local level project of citizen security. As a constantly evolving field, shaping citizen security remains an exciting and dynamic challenge ahead. 



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