

Execution of public works in Latin America: A systematic review of challenges in public management

Ejecución de obras públicas en América Latina: revisión sistemática sobre los desafíos para la gestión pública

Jessica Lila Rivera Ynoñan

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3519-2721>

jlrivera@ucvvirtual.edu.pe

Universidad César Vallejo

Lima – Peru.

Ana María Villegas Alvarez

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5958-6299>

avillegasa@ucvvirtual.edu.pe

Universidad César Vallejo

Lima - Peru.

Jenny Milagros Farfán Martínez

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9229-0268>

jfarfan2@ucvvirtual.edu.pe

Universidad César Vallejo

Lima – Peru.

Giovana Edith Ruiz Villavicencio

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9216-4456>

gruizvi01@ucvvirtual.edu.pe

Universidad César Vallejo

Lima - Peru.



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Abstract

The execution of state infrastructure projects has been addressed in research ranging from contracting processes to the fulfillment of their public purpose. However, it is rarely studied as a main object, being more common to analyze it as a variable associated with other factors, such as problems in the planning of requirements, deficiencies in technical inputs, inadequate monitoring and control, or contractual defaults. Therefore, this study set out to analyze the academic production indexed in Web of Science, ProQuest, SciELO and Scopus, corresponding to Latin American countries in the period 2020-2025, focused on problems related to the execution of public works. The methodology adopted was a systematic review, which made it possible to locate 42 articles from different countries in the region. Among the main findings, the most researched topic was the factors affecting the execution of public works. Likewise, a strong relationship was identified between the monitoring and control of execution and the components of transparency and accountability.

Keywords: public procurement, supervision of public works, efficient public management.

Resumen

La ejecución de proyectos de infraestructura estatal ha sido abordada en investigaciones que van desde los procesos de contratación hasta el cumplimiento de su finalidad pública. Sin embargo, rara vez se estudia como objeto principal, siendo más común que se analice como una variable asociada a otros factores, tales como problemas en la planificación de requerimientos, deficiencias en los insumos técnicos, seguimiento y control inadecuados, o incumplimientos contractuales. Por ello, este estudio se propuso analizar la producción académica indexada en Web of Science, ProQuest, SciELO y Scopus, correspondiente a países de América Latina en el período 2020-2025, centrada en las problemáticas vinculadas a la ejecución de obras públicas. La metodología adoptada fue una revisión sistemática, que permitió localizar 42 artículos provenientes de diversos países de la región. Entre los principales hallazgos destaca que el tema más investigado corresponde a los factores que inciden en la ejecución de obras públicas. Asimismo, se identificó una fuerte relación entre el seguimiento y control de la ejecución, y los componentes de transparencia y rendición de cuentas.

Palabras clave: contratación pública, supervisión de obras públicas, gestión pública eficiente.

Introduction

The execution of infrastructure projects represents one of the most visible expressions of state management and the use of public resources, as it embodies governmental policies through works aimed at collective well-being. This concept encompasses processes of construction, reconstruction, maintenance, or rehabilitation of public assets and can be carried out through various modalities, such as contracts for works, direct administration, state-to-state agreements, tax-funded projects, or public-private partnerships (Contraloría General de la República [CGR], 2024). The proper execution of these projects involves not only technical or budgetary aspects but also a sequential chain of administrative acts that begins with the formulation of the technical file and concludes with the final settlement of the project (Huachaca, 2024). In this sense, studying public works execution allows for the identification of factors that facilitate or hinder efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency in the development of infrastructures essential for social and economic progress.

Internationally, the phenomenon of incomplete, poorly executed, or stalled public works is a persistent issue documented in various Latin American countries and other regions. Studies such as those by Cano (2023) and Campoverde-Briones et al. (2021) have demonstrated how regulatory gaps, low institutional capacity, and the awarding of contracts with imbalanced budgets negatively affect project execution. The specialized literature indicates that poor planning, underestimation of costs, and lack of timely control lead to significant financial losses, erode citizen trust, and delay the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. Furthermore, research by Espejo-Pingus & Cruz-Ipanaque (2023) in Ecuador and by Valentín Mballa & Bermúdez (2021) in Mexico highlights the need to strengthen citizen participation and social audit mechanisms to prevent corruption and ensure the quality of the works.

In the case of Peru, the situation is particularly alarming. According to the Report on Stalled Works No. 0007-2024-CG/SESNC from the Contraloría General de la República, as of June 2024, there were 2,256 stalled public works nationwide, with no physical progress in their execution for the past six months or more. This issue affects all levels of government and poses a serious obstacle to territorial development and the provision of basic services. Studies by Medina & Ingaluque (2020) show that up to 68.31% of compliance with a public work depends on its physical execution and actual duration, while the remaining 31.69% is explained by complementary factors such as administrative or budgetary management. Additionally, research by Andrade et al. (2024) indicates that the tendency to award contracts to the lowest bidder can compromise the structural quality of projects. This is further supported by findings from Ponce & Loor (2020) and Pincay et al. (2025), who argue that lack of planning, cost underestimation, and poor management of administrative processes lead to significant economic losses for the state.

This reality underscores the necessity for rigorous studies that systematically compile the most relevant theoretical and empirical contributions regarding public works execution. This research addresses that need by focusing on analyzing the scientific production published between 2020 and May 2025 in the databases Web of Science, ProQuest, SciELO, and Scopus.

From this, the following research question arises: What are the main topics researched in relation to the execution of public works in Peru and Latin America between 2020 and 2025? The objective is to identify the main thematic categories, findings, and proposals related to public works execution in Latin American countries, with an emphasis on the Peruvian context, in order to establish an updated overview of scientific knowledge in the field

and contribute to improving policies, regulatory frameworks, and public management strategies aimed at reducing the incidence of stalled and incomplete works.

Methodology

This research was developed using a systematic review approach. The object of study was the execution of public works in the Latin American context, addressed through the analysis of scientific articles published in indexed journals. The main strategy employed was systematic documentary review, aimed at identifying theoretical and empirical findings on practices, challenges, and proposals related to the management and execution of public infrastructure projects.

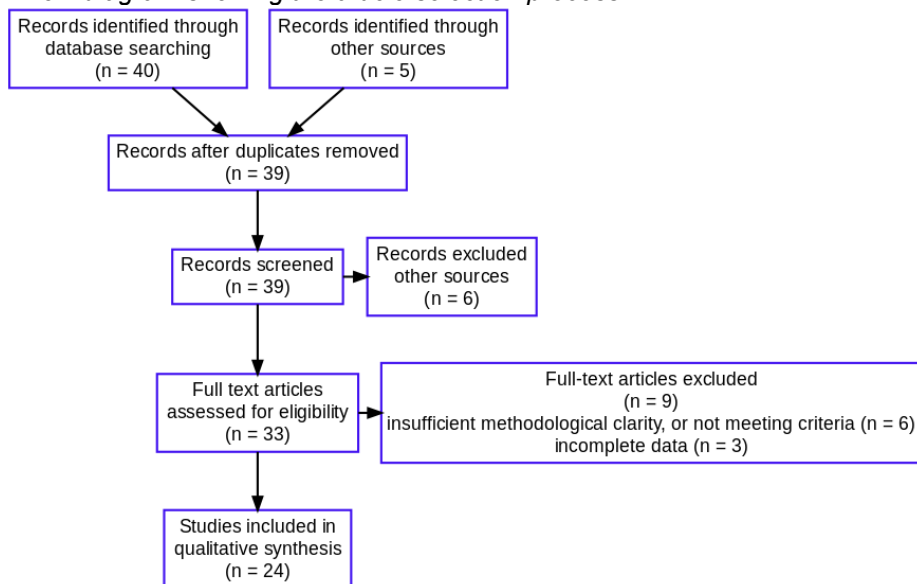
The information search was conducted between January and May 2025, utilizing the databases Web of Science, ProQuest, SciELO, and Scopus. The following inclusion criteria were applied: (1) articles containing the terms “execution of public works,” “supervision of public works,” “execution of public investment,” or “public procurement” in the title, abstract, or keywords; (2) analysis units from Latin American countries; (3) study context corresponding to public procurement linked to works; and (4) articles published between 2020 and May 2025.

Initially, 45 articles were identified (40 from academic databases and 5 through cross-referencing). After removing duplicates and reviewing titles and abstracts, 10 studies that did not meet the established criteria were discarded. Subsequently, 30 full-text articles were analyzed, of which 6 were excluded for lacking methodological rigor or providing insufficient information about the object of study. Ultimately, 24 articles were included in the qualitative synthesis, all of which were fully accessible, published in peer-reviewed journals, and had empirical or documentary focus.

Regarding geographic origin, 21 of the studies corresponded to research conducted in specific national contexts: Argentina (2), Brazil (4), Chile (2), Colombia (4), Ecuador (3), Bolivia (2), Mexico (2), and Paraguay (2). The remaining three articles presented regional, comparative, or multinational approaches and were not assigned to a specific country but were considered pertinent for their analytical value regarding public works execution in Latin America.

For the analysis of the selected studies, an ad hoc systematization matrix was constructed, organizing information in the following fields: (1) author and year of publication, (2) central research theme, (3) study objectives, and (4) main findings and contributions related to public infrastructure execution. This matrix allowed for structuring the 24 documents according to their most relevant contributions, which were subsequently categorized through thematic content analysis.

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram showing the article selection process



Source. Content generated from <https://hollyhartman.shinyapps.io/PRISMAFlowDiagram/>

Through this procedure, four predominant analytical axes were identified: (a) preparation of technical requirements, (b) supervision, control, and transparency, (c) regulatory framework, and (d) citizen participation.

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Concurrently, 65 theoretical and/or empirical contributions were extracted and classified within these categories. These contributions range from key findings to proposals for improvement and normative orientations applicable to strengthening the execution of public works. To organize the results, Microsoft Excel was used, where the contributions were grouped according to their frequency of appearance in the documents.

It is important to note that a single article could contribute to more than one thematic category, resulting in a total number of coded records exceeding the number of analyzed articles. Specifically, the 24 selected studies generated a total of 84 categorized entries, demonstrating the richness and conceptual diversity of the reviewed literature.

Finally, the results were systematized and presented through two complementary resources: (1) a bar graph showing the thematic distribution of studies by analytical axis, and (2) a frequency table summarizing the contributions identified in each category. This methodological procedure not only allowed for the rigorous organization of findings but also provided a comprehensive view of the most consolidated lines of research as well as those requiring further academic depth regarding public works execution in Latin America.

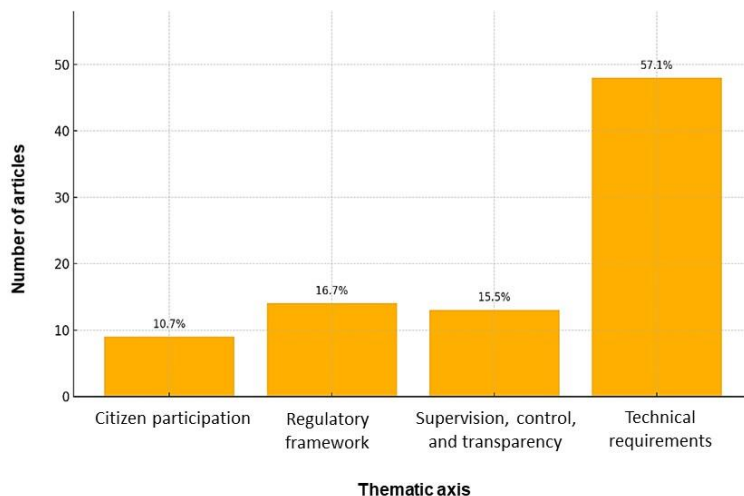
Results

As explained in the methodological section, the presentation of findings is organized around two fundamental components. First, a bar chart is presented that illustrates the thematic distribution of the reviewed studies, enabling visualization of how many articles addressed each analytical axis. Second, a table is included that systematically organizes the most representative contributions or proposals found in the articles, grouped by their frequency and conceptual relevance.

Thematic axes addressed in the literature on public works execution

Based on the analyzed documentary corpus, several thematic focuses related to public works execution were identified. These were classified into four major analytical categories, each grouping a specific set of studies. The distribution of articles by category is presented in Figure 1, which allows appreciation of the level of academic attention received by each thematic axis during the considered period.

Figure 1: Categories derived from research topics on public works



Note. Authors' own elaboration

From the analysis of the 42 reviewed articles, four main thematic axes were identified: the development of technical requirements, supervision, control and transparency, regulatory framework, and citizen participation.

The most addressed axis was the development of technical requirements, with an emphasis on the quality of the documentation and the personnel responsible for its formulation. Andrade et al. (2024), Benites & Salguero (2021), and Calero (2022) agree that inadequate technical planning is the source of numerous contractual issues, ranging from deadline extensions to project suspensions. Flores (2022) and Costa-Cevallos et al. (2022) highlight that omissions in the technical documentation can lead to budgetary imbalances, while Ponce & Llor (2020) underscore the need for accurate cost assessments to avoid undervalued bids. In this regard, Palacín (2025) and Rivera, J., Villegas, A., Farfán, J., & Ruiz, G. (2026). Execution of public works in Latin America: A systematic review of challenges in public management. *Revista InveCom*, 6 (1). 1-9 <https://zenodo.org/records/15549374>

Peláez-Gil & Iannacone (2022) advocate for the incorporation of sustainability criteria from the requirements phase. Finally, Tate (2023) warns about the risks of exclusively awarding contracts to the lowest bidder, a common but counterproductive practice.

The second axis, supervision, control, and transparency, was addressed by Huachaca (2024), who emphasizes the need for continuous oversight during the execution of works. Medina Álvarez & Ingaluque (2020) demonstrated that technical supervision directly impacts the physical compliance levels of projects. Espejo-Pingus & Cruz-Ipanaque (2023), as well as Salazar & Mucha (2020), highlight the role of audits as preventive tools against corruption. Vaicilla-González et al. (2020) & Navarro (2020) provide evidence that transparency in budget execution strengthens institutional trust.

Regarding the regulatory framework, studies reveal a series of legal gaps that hinder the effective execution of works. Arancibia (2023) and Cano (2023) analyze the rigidity of regulations in the face of unforeseen circumstances, while Campoverde-Briones et al. (2021) propose the need for clear guidelines to reduce discretionary decisions. Gutiérrez and Gutiérrez (2020) emphasize the importance of establishing specific contractual clauses to improve control over execution. Medina Flores (2021, 2023) proposes a comprehensive review of the public investment model to optimize its operational performance.

Finally, the citizen participation axis, though less addressed, presents strategic contributions. Calderón & Quispe (2021) and Entrena (2022) emphasize the role of social control in supervising local works. García Román & Liccioni (2024) demonstrate how access to information enhances citizen involvement. Valentín Mballa & Bermúdez (2021) highlight that training the population improves the relevance of requested works and reinforces the process of citizen oversight.

These studies converge on the importance of accurately developing technical requirements—particularly the technical documentation for the work—since this document defines the conditions and parameters for proper contracting. If it contains deficiencies, this will directly impact contractual execution, potentially leading to contractual modifications (such as deadline extensions or additional work) and, consequently, an increase in costs. Therefore, it is emphasized that conditions and requirements must be clarified from the preparatory acts without errors. To achieve this, qualified, highly trained personnel with experience in both works execution and public management are required. Furthermore, it is emphasized that the lowest price should not be prioritized; rather, the focus should be on quality, efficient, effective, and timely contracting that meets the needs of the population and fulfills the public purpose for which it was conceived.

Key contributions related to public works execution

The analysis of the collected articles allowed for the identification of multiple findings, conclusions, and proposals related to the process of contracting and executing public works. These contributions were organized according to their thematic recurrence, categorizing them to reflect the most discussed axes in the literature. Table 1 presents the frequency with which these topics emerge in the analyzed studies, allowing visualization of the academic attention given to various issues.

Among the most frequent contributions is the concern for the adequate formulation of technical requirements, especially the technical documentation for the work. Various studies agree that this stage is crucial for ensuring efficient contracting. In this regard, the necessity of having specialized personnel with experience in public management and technical capabilities to ensure the quality of the design prior to execution is emphasized.

Another recurring contribution pertains to strengthening monitoring and control mechanisms during the contractual phases. The research reveals significant limitations in institutional supervision and government oversight. Additionally, it is noted that many public entities operate with professionals lacking specialized training in public contracting or whose certification level does not correspond to the technical complexity of the projects underway.

Finally, a cross-cutting line of proposals points to the implementation of strategies aimed at improving public works execution comprehensively. These include measures to prevent delays, mitigate cost overruns, and ensure compliance with the public purpose. In line with the assertions made by Valqui & Yglesias (2023), it is highlighted that the timely detection of critical factors and the adoption of corrective measures are key to successfully completing infrastructure projects.

Table 1: Thematic axes or areas for improvement in public works contracting and execution

Thematic axis	Subcategory	Representative authors
Development of technical requirements	Adequate formulation of technical documentation for public works	Andrade et al. (2024), Benites & Salguero (2021), Calero (2022), Palacín (2025)
	Deficiencies in the formulation of technical requirements	Flores (2022), Costa-Cevallos et al. (2022), Ponce & Loor (2020)
	Need for highly qualified personnel in public management	Soto (2021), Soto (2022), Rodríguez (2021)
	Consideration of quality and environmental sustainability criteria	Pelaez-Gil & Iannacone (2022), Palacín (2025)
	Risks of awarding contracts based on the lowest price	Andrade et al. (2024), Tate (2023)
Supervision, control, and transparency	Continuous monitoring and control in public works	Alejos (2020), Huachaca (2024), Medina & Ingaluque (2020)
	Audits and corrective actions during execution	Salazar & Mucha (2020), Espejo-Pingus & Cruz-Ipanaque (2023)
	Institutional transparency and accountability	Vaicilla-González et al. (2020), Navarro (2020)
Regulatory framework	Regulatory gaps and the need for legal updates	Arancibia (2023), Cano (2023), Campoverde-Briones et al. (2021)
	Proposal for guidelines and technical instruments	Medina (2021), Medina (2023)
	Establishment of specific conditions in contracts	Gutiérrez & Gutiérrez (2020)
Citizen participation	Promotion of citizen participation in works supervision	Calderón & Quispe (2021), Entrena (2022)
	Access to public information as the basis of social control	Navarro (2020), García Román & Liccioni (2024)
	Training for citizens on public contracting issues	Valentín Mballa & Bermúdez (2021)

Note. Authors' own elaboration.

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review indicate that, despite the strategic relevance of public works as instruments for economic and social development, the number of studies specifically focused on their execution phase remains limited. This scarcity contrasts with the high media exposure received by cases of stalled or poorly executed projects, particularly in Latin American contexts. According to García Román & Liccioni (2024), this gap may be partially explained by the lack of informed citizen participation and the absence of effective public oversight mechanisms.

A consistent theme identified in the reviewed literature is the deficiency in technical planning, which presents itself as a structural cause of issues during execution. Flores (2022) and Costa-Cevallos et al. (2022)

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agree that errors in technical documentation generate cost overruns, contractual modifications, and conflicts between parties. Ponce & Loor (2020) link these deficiencies to the underestimation of costs and the lack of specialized technical personnel in the pre-contracting stages. In response, Palacín (2025) and Calero (2022) propose adopting a results-based management and sustainability approach from the preparatory acts, which would improve the quality and relevance of projects from their inception.

Another relevant finding is the institutional weakness in monitoring and control mechanisms. Authors like Huachaca (2024), Espejo-Pingus & Cruz-Ipanaque (2023), and Salazar & Mucha (2020) highlight that ineffective oversight favors deadline noncompliance, inappropriate resource use, and, in some cases, corruption. Vaicilla-González et al. (2020) insist on the need to implement more transparent execution processes subject to auditing, which would strengthen institutional trust and improve accountability.

Regarding the regulatory framework, the reviewed studies warn about its rigidity and obsolescence. Arancibia (2023), Cano (2023), and Campoverde-Briones et al. (2021) argue that current regulations do not allow for adequate adaptation to the dynamic complexities of project execution. From a critical perspective, Medina Flores (2021, 2023) advocates for a structural reform of the public investment model in Peru to provide the system with greater operational flexibility and efficiency in the use of public resources.

Finally, while the citizen participation axis appears less frequently in the literature, several authors position it as a transformative element with high potential. Calderón & Quispe (2021) and Valentín Mballa & Bermúdez (2021) argue that an empowered and trained citizenry can perform more effective social oversight functions, contributing to the monitoring of project execution. In line with this, Navarro (2020) emphasizes that access to public information is a key factor in democratizing public management and fostering a culture of transparency and shared responsibility.

Conclusions

Based on the systematized findings, it is concluded that the execution of public works in Latin America faces persistent structural challenges, particularly related to the inadequate formulation of technical requirements and the limited institutional capacity to adequately supervise contractual processes. The reviewed literature agrees that errors and omissions in technical documentation represent one of the main causes of cost overruns, project delays, and legal conflicts, negatively impacting public spending efficiency and the legitimacy of state interventions.

Factors exacerbating these issues include the lack of professionalism among responsible personnel, the awarding of contracts based solely on the lowest price without considering quality criteria, and a rigid and fragmented regulatory framework that fails to respond to the actual dynamics of execution. In light of this scenario, it is imperative to rethink the public contracting model from a perspective centered on quality, sustainability, and strategic planning, particularly strengthening the preparatory phase as a key pillar to ensure effective, transparent, and results-oriented execution.

Furthermore, the review highlights weak citizen participation in monitoring public works, representing an underutilized opportunity to strengthen democratic oversight and the social legitimacy of projects. Although some studies highlight the value of social control and access to public information as tools for overseeing state resource use, their practical implementation remains marginal.

Consequently, moving towards a more efficient, equitable, and corruption-free execution of public works requires not only technical and regulatory reforms but also a profound cultural and institutional transformation that recognizes the value of specialized human capital and promotes active citizen involvement. Only through this comprehensive approach will it be possible to ensure that public works are executed not only with greater efficiency but also truly respond to the collective needs for which they were conceived.

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