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Trends in budget execution in organizations: a literature review

Tendencias en la ejecución presupuestal en las organizaciones: una revisión bibliográfica

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Abstract

This study conducts a systematic review of 42 academic articles published between 2008 and 2025, aimed at analyzing the conceptual and methodological transformations of budget execution in organizations. The objective is to examine contemporary trends that redefine the role of the budget, shifting it from a rigid instrument of financial control to a strategic tool focused on efficiency, flexibility, and value creation. The results identify seven predominant themes: traditional budgeting, budget flexibility, reduction of budget slack, digitization of budget processes, the Beyond Budgeting approach, zero-based budgeting (ZBB), and activity-based budgeting (ABB). These trends show a gradual transition from static models to more dynamic and adaptive management systems, aligned with highly changeable organizational environments. The analysis highlights that ZBB and Beyond Budgeting are consolidating their position as alternative approaches that favor expenditure rationalization, operational autonomy, and decision-making based on relevant and timely information. Likewise, digitization and ABB contribute significantly to strengthening traceability, transparency, and resource control. Taken together, the findings reveal a growing link between budget execution and institutional strategy, as well as the need to integrate technological tools to optimize planning and control processes. It is concluded that contemporary budget execution should be understood as a comprehensive strategic management process that drives sustainability, innovation, and organizational competitiveness.

Keywords: budget execution, organizational efficiency, zero-based budgeting.

Resumen

El presente estudio desarrolla una revisión sistemática de 42 artículos académicos publicados entre los años 2008 y 2025, orientados a analizar las transformaciones conceptuales y metodológicas de la ejecución presupuestal en las organizaciones. El objetivo es examinar las tendencias contemporáneas que redefinen el rol del presupuesto, desplazándolo de un instrumento rígido de control financiero hacia una herramienta estratégica enfocada en la eficiencia, la flexibilidad y la creación de valor. Los resultados identifican siete líneas temáticas predominantes: el presupuesto tradicional, la flexibilización presupuestaria, la reducción de la holgura presupuestal (slack), la digitalización de los procesos presupuestarios, el enfoque Beyond Budgeting, el presupuesto base cero (ZBB) y el presupuesto basado en actividades (ABB). Estas tendencias evidencian una transición progresiva desde modelos estáticos hacia sistemas de gestión más dinámicos y adaptativos, alineados

con entornos organizacionales altamente cambiantes. El análisis resalta que el ZBB y el Beyond Budgeting se consolidan como enfoques alternativos que favorecen la racionalización del gasto, la autonomía operativa y la toma de decisiones basada en información relevante y oportuna. Asimismo, la digitalización y el ABB contribuyen significativamente a fortalecer la trazabilidad, la transparencia y el control de los recursos. En conjunto, los hallazgos revelan un vínculo creciente entre la ejecución presupuestal y la estrategia institucional, así como la necesidad de integrar herramientas tecnológicas para optimizar los procesos de planificación y control. Se concluye que la ejecución presupuestal contemporánea debe entenderse como un proceso integral de gestión estratégica que impulsa la sostenibilidad, la innovación y la competitividad organizacional.

Palabras clave: ejecución presupuestal, eficiencia organizacional, presupuesto base cero.

Introduction

Budget management has undergone profound changes in recent decades, driven by the need to respond to increasingly dynamic, uncertain, and highly competitive economic environments. Traditionally conceived as a financial control instrument oriented toward expenditure allocation and oversight, the budget has become the subject of growing criticism within contemporary organizational settings. Chief among the critiques of the traditional budgeting model are its operational rigidity, limited capacity to adapt to environmental shifts, and weak alignment with long-term strategic objectives. These shortcomings have motivated both academic and professional circles to seek alternative approaches to budget execution characterized by greater flexibility, participatory engagement, and value-creating orientation.

Within this framework, the budget is no longer understood exclusively as a technical financial tool but rather as a central component of strategic management. Approaches such as zero-based budgeting (ZBB), the Beyond Budgeting model, and activity-based budgeting (ABB) have gained prominence by proposing mechanisms that promote more efficient resource allocation, stronger alignment with organizational strategy, and more agile responsiveness to changing conditions. Examining these models provides insight into how budget execution can help address contemporary challenges related to sustainability, innovation, organizational agility, and continuous improvement.

In this context, the present study aims to analyze the main theoretical and practical contributions concerning budget execution, drawing on a systematic review of 42 academic articles published between 2008 and 2025. The review focuses on identifying predominant trends in the international literature, as well as emerging models adopted by various organizations to overcome the limitations of traditional budgeting.

Methodology

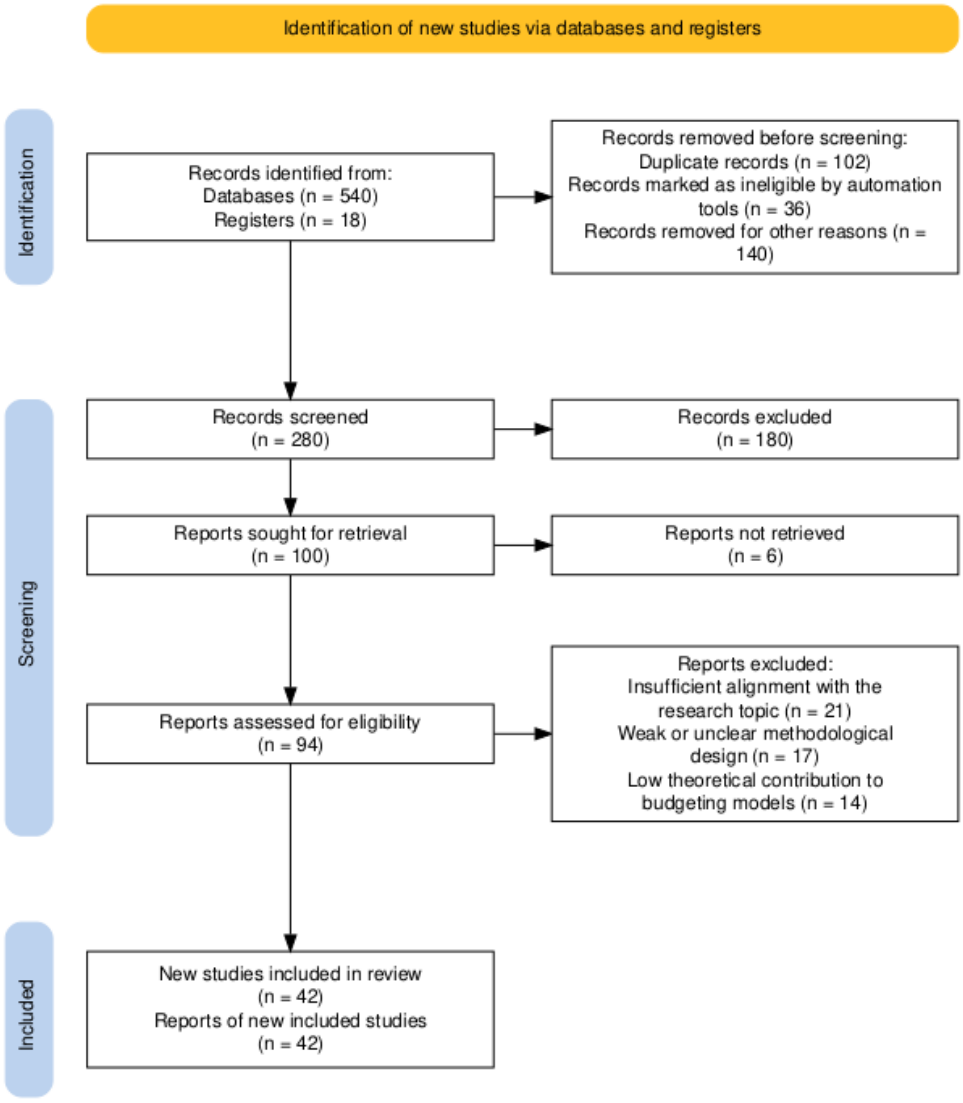
The systematic review was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, following a rigorous, exhaustive, and transparent procedure for identifying, selecting, and synthesizing relevant scientific evidence. In the initial search phase, 540 records were identified from specialized academic databases, along with 18 additional documents obtained through other sources, yielding a total of 558 potentially eligible records.

During the preliminary screening stage, 102 duplicate studies were removed, 36 documents identified as invalid through automated detection tools were excluded, and 140 records were discarded for various reasons, including lack of full-text access, incomplete documents, or content clearly unrelated to the domain of budget execution.

Following this initial filtering, 280 studies proceeded to the screening phase, during which titles and abstracts were evaluated against predefined inclusion criteria. As a result, 180 articles were excluded for not addressing the core research objective. Subsequently, 100 studies were considered for full-text retrieval; however, 6 articles could not be obtained due to access restrictions or technical issues with the repositories.

Figure 1

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for study identification, screening, and selection



Note: The figure presents the systematic process followed to locate, filter, and select the studies included in the review. In accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines, it details the stages of database and registry searching, the removal of duplicates and irrelevant studies, and the eligibility assessment that led to the final inclusion of 42 studies. This procedure aligns with the recommendations of Haddaway et al. (2022), who emphasize the importance of traceability, transparency, and reproducibility in contemporary systematic reviews.

The 94 studies ultimately retrieved underwent a detailed eligibility assessment, considering thematic coherence, methodological robustness, and theoretical relevance. In this phase, 52 works were excluded, distributed as follows: lack of alignment with the research question (n = 21), methodological weaknesses or insufficient information (n = 17), and limited theoretical contribution to emerging budget management models (n = 14).

As a result of this systematic process, 42 studies met the criteria for quality, relevance, and consistency, constituting the final corpus of documents included in the review. The selection was based both on their contribution to the analysis of budget execution and on their relevance to understanding contemporary trends and emerging approaches in organizational and financial settings.

This methodological procedure, aligned with the recommendations of Haddaway et al. (2022), ensured transparency, traceability, and reproducibility at each stage of the evidence synthesis process.

For data analysis, each document was examined based on its title, abstract, keywords, and full content, enabling the identification of thematic axes and key findings. The studies were subsequently grouped into nine predominant thematic lines, including traditional budgeting, budgetary flexibility, Beyond Budgeting, zero-based budgeting (ZBB), activity-based budgeting (ABB), digitization of budgeting processes, and the linkage between budgeting and institutional strategy, among others.

This methodological approach allowed for the construction of a comparative and structured overview of the various budget execution models addressed in the recent academic literature, as well as the identification of eight specific contributions, which are presented and discussed in the results section.

Results

Following the proposed methodology, the results are organized along two complementary analytical axes:

1. the main research themes on budget execution identified across the 42 reviewed articles, and
2. the theoretical and practical contributions derived from these studies, classified according to their frequency and relevance in the literature.

Principal research themes in budget execution

The analysis of academic articles published between 2008 and 2025 revealed a set of budgetary trends that reflect the evolution from the traditional approach toward more dynamic, strategic, and efficiency-oriented models. These trends were grouped into seven predominant thematic categories.

The first category corresponds to traditional budgeting, wherein various studies reveal the absence of formal budgets, inadequate designs, or weak alignment with organizational objectives. Nevertheless, some authors note that when properly implemented, traditional budgeting can contribute to improving operational efficiency and financial performance. In this vein, Shinoda (2008), Bybordi et al. (2019), and Sanni and Fasesin (2022) highlight its utility as a fundamental planning and control instrument.

The second category concerns the flexibilization of traditional budgeting. While criticisms persist regarding its rigidity in the face of changing environments, several studies acknowledge that the budget remains a key tool for organizational planning, execution, and control. In this context, mechanisms such as periodic reviews, scenario planning, the use of performance indicators, and the involvement of different hierarchical levels are proposed to increase the model's adaptability. Authors such as Libby and Lindsay (2010), Nikodijevic et al. (2021), and Bukh et al. (2024) underscore the importance of incorporating flexibility without entirely abandoning the traditional budgetary framework.

The third category addresses the reduction of budgetary slack. Various studies show that, in response to uncertainty and with the aim of minimizing deviations between planned and executed figures, organizations tend to inflate their budgets. This practice generates distortions in resource allocation, fosters operational inefficiency, and reduces financial transparency, thereby affecting strategic decision-making. Authors such as Al Jasimee et al. (2023), Ramlall and Grobbelaar (2024), and Zhou et al. (2025) propose the systematic analysis of budgetary deviations as a mechanism to mitigate slack and enhance financial discipline.

The fourth thematic category centers on the digitization of budgetary processes. The literature emphasizes that the use of technologies such as ERP systems, cloud platforms, process automation, and predictive analytics tools contributes to improving information accuracy, reducing budget preparation times, and strengthening execution control. Studies such as those by Piosik and Karmanska (2023) and Sonjaya (2024) highlight that digitization constitutes a key factor in modernizing budget management and reinforcing data-driven decision-making.

The fifth category corresponds to the Beyond Budgeting approach, which emerges as a response to criticisms of annual budget rigidity. This current proposes replacing fixed budgets with more flexible, decentralized, and adaptive practices, such as continuous forecasting, internal and external benchmarking, and greater autonomy in operational decision-making. Its purpose is to promote agile organizations capable of responding effectively in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) contexts. Authors such as Bogsnes (2009), Becker (2014), and Bourmistrov and Kaarboe (2013) concur on its transformative potential in financial and organizational management.

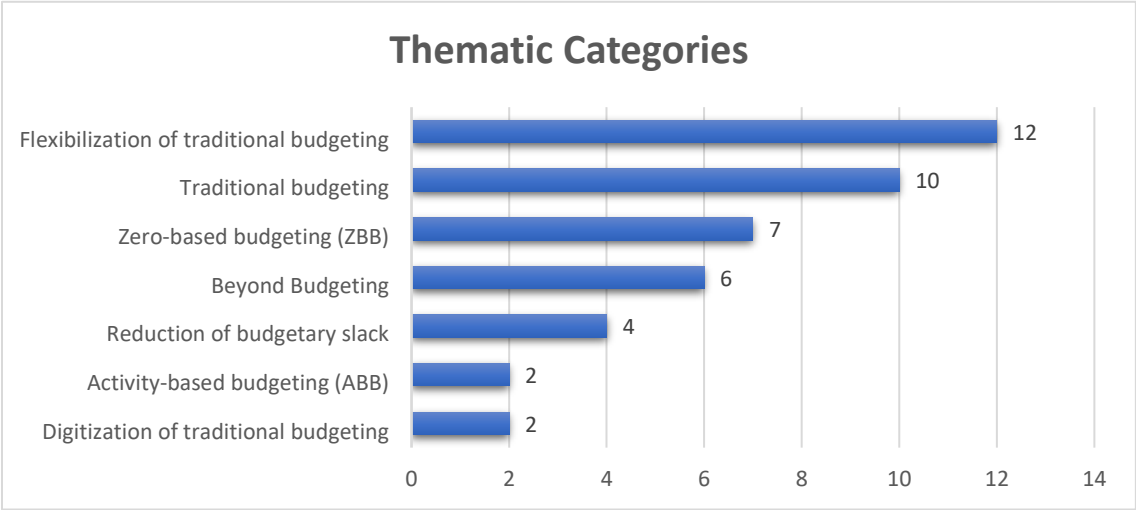
The sixth category pertains to zero-based budgeting (ZBB), oriented toward expenditure rationalization and efficiency in resource allocation. Unlike the incremental approach, ZBB requires justifying each budget line item from its origin, enabling the elimination of unnecessary expenses and alignment of the budget with strategic priorities. Although conceived by Pyhrr in 1970, recent studies in countries such as India, Brazil, and the United States have revitalized its empirical application in contemporary organizational contexts, particularly in scenarios of restructuring and fiscal austerity.

The seventh thematic category corresponds to activity-based budgeting (ABB), which represents an evolution of activity-based costing (ABC). This approach seeks to directly link financial resources with value-generating activities, allowing for the identification of hidden costs, the elimination of operational inefficiencies, and improved precision in operational budgeting. Research such as that of Pietrzak (2013) and Aryani and Prasetyo (2024) highlights its usefulness in strengthening transparency and efficiency in budget management.

Across these themes, the analysis reveals that budgeting is increasingly approached from a strategic and comprehensive perspective, with its impact assessed not only on financial performance but also on decision-making quality, institutional alignment, and organizational culture. This expanded view reflects the complexity and multidimensionality of the budgetary phenomenon in the administrative sciences, where accounting, strategic, organizational, and behavioral perspectives converge.

Figure 1

Thematic trends in the evolution of organizational budgeting



Note. The chart shows a clear predominance of studies focused on flexibilization of traditional budgeting (12 mentions) and traditional budgeting (10 mentions), indicating strong academic attention toward the adaptation and updating of conventional budgeting models. In the background, more innovative approaches such as zero-based budgeting (ZBB) and Beyond Budgeting appear, reflecting interest in methodologies oriented toward efficiency and strategic planning.

Principal contributions on budget execution

The analysis of the 42 articles allowed for the identification of eight categories of theoretical and practical contributions, classified according to their frequency in the reviewed literature (Table 1). The most frequent category corresponds to the improvement of decision-making and control through budgeting, identified in 10 articles. In this line, the authors emphasize that the budget transcends its traditional financial function and becomes a key tool for managerial management, performance monitoring, and results evaluation, contributing to more efficient resource administration.

In second place are the application of zero-based budgeting (ZBB) and criticisms of traditional budgeting, each with 7 articles. In the case of ZBB, the studies highlight its effectiveness in rationalizing expenditure and optimizing resource allocation, especially in contexts of budgetary constraint. Meanwhile, criticisms of the traditional model emphasize its rigidity, excessive emphasis on financial control, and limited articulation with strategy, which has driven the adoption of alternative approaches.

The promotion of the Beyond Budgeting approach appears in 6 articles, which underscore the need to move toward more flexible, decentralized, and adaptive budgeting models capable of responding to highly uncertain environments through practices such as continuous forecasting and benchmarking. The articulation between budgeting and organizational strategy is identified in 4 studies, where the budget is recognized as an integrating instrument for strategic planning and efficient resource allocation. Likewise, another 4 articles highlight the methodological diversity in budgetary analysis, evidencing the use of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed approaches to address the phenomenon from different perspectives.

To a lesser extent, contributions related to the budget as a tool for organizational and cultural change are identified (3 articles), attributing to it a transformative role in institutional learning and adaptation processes. Finally, the implementation of activity-based budgeting (ABB), present in 2 articles, highlights its contribution to traceability, transparency, and efficiency in resource management.

Overall, the results show that budget execution is progressively being conceived as a strategic, dynamic, and multifunctional instrument, transcending its traditional vision of financial control. The contributions identified allow for the recognition of both the limitations of the classical model and the opportunities offered by emerging approaches, opening new lines of research and application in organizations demanding greater efficiency, transparency, and adaptive capacity.

Table 1

Frequency of contributions made in the articles

Contribution categories	Number of articles
Criticisms of traditional budgeting: rigidity, financial control, lack of strategic alignment	7
Promotion of the Beyond Budgeting approach: flexibility, decentralization, continuous forecasting	6
Application of zero-based budgeting (ZBB): efficiency, elimination of unnecessary expenditures	7
Implementation of activity-based budgeting (ABB): traceability, transparency, and efficiency	2
Articulation between budgeting and organizational strategy	4
Improvement of decision-making and control through budgeting	10
Use of the budget as a tool for organizational and cultural change	2
Methodological diversity in budgetary analysis: qualitative, quantitative, mixed	4
Total	**42**

Note: The analyzed articles show greater attention toward the use of budgeting as a tool for decision-making and control (10 studies), as well as toward criticisms of the traditional model and the application of zero-based budgeting (7 each). In contrast, approaches such as activity-based budgeting and its role in organizational change have a lower presence, revealing opportunities for theoretical and practical deepening in these emerging lines.

Discussion

The results derived from the analysis of the 42 reviewed articles reveal a progressive evolution in the conception and application of budget execution in contemporary organizations. While traditional budgeting continues to be a widely used practice, the limitations associated with its rigidity, short-term orientation, and limited adaptability have spurred the emergence and consolidation of alternative approaches that are more flexible, strategic, and efficiency-oriented, which is clearly reflected in the diversity of thematic categories identified.

First, traditional budgeting remains the subject of significant questioning, particularly regarding inadequate designs and weak alignment with organizational objectives. Nevertheless, the findings also confirm that this tool retains relevance when applied rigorously and contextually. Studies such as those by Shinoda (2008), Bybordi et al. (2019), and Sanni and Fasesin (2022) agree that proper implementation of traditional budgeting can positively contribute to operational efficiency and financial performance. This contrast suggests that the problem does not necessarily lie in the instrument itself but in how it is conceived and executed within organizations.

Second, the flexibilization of traditional budgeting emerges as one of the most recurrent responses to these limitations. The analyzed studies highlight practices such as periodic reviews, scenario planning, the use of strategic indicators, and the participation of different hierarchical levels as mechanisms to increase budget adaptability. Authors such as Libby and Lindsay (2010), Nikodijevic et al. (2021), and Bukh et al. (2024) emphasize that flexibility does not imply abandoning the budget but rather transforming it into a dynamic tool capable of responding to increasingly volatile and uncertain organizational environments.

The reduction of budgetary slack constitutes a third relevant line of discussion. The results confirm that deliberate budget inflation, used as a strategy to reduce deviations, generates adverse consequences such as operational inefficiency, distortion in resource allocation, and loss of financial transparency. Recent research (Al Jasimee et al., 2023; Ramlall and Grobbelaar, 2024; Zhou et al., 2025) agrees that systematic analysis of budgetary deviations and the strengthening of control mechanisms can significantly contribute to mitigating this phenomenon, improving the quality of information for strategic decision-making.

Fourth, the digitization of budgeting processes reflects the impact of emerging technologies on financial management. Although still with a limited presence in the reviewed literature, the analyzed studies highlight that the use of ERP systems, process automation, cloud platforms, and predictive analytics tools improves projection

accuracy, reduces formulation times, and strengthens execution control. Works such as those by Piosik and Karmanska (2023) and Sonjaya (2024) suggest that digital transformation constitutes a key enabler for modernizing traditional budgetary systems.

The Beyond Budgeting approach presents itself as one of the most disruptive proposals within the budgetary debate. By questioning the utility of the fixed annual budget, this current promotes decentralized, adaptive models based on continuous forecasting and benchmarking. Authors such as Bogsnes (2009), Becker (2014), and Bourmistrov and Kaarboe (2013) highlight its potential to strengthen organizational agility in VUCA contexts. However, the studies also warn that its implementation faces significant cultural and structural barriers, especially in organizations with hierarchical and highly centralized management models.

The application of zero-based budgeting (ZBB) constitutes another relevant trend identified in the discussion. The reviewed studies show that this approach is particularly effective in contexts of fiscal austerity, organizational restructuring, or the need for expenditure rationalization. Although its implementation demands greater analytical capacities and a significant effort in terms of information and time, the benefits associated with the elimination of unnecessary expenses and the optimization of resource allocation have been widely documented in recent research conducted in various national contexts.

Finally, activity-based budgeting (ABB) represents a methodological evolution aimed at linking financial resources with value-generating activities. Authors such as Pietrzak (2013) and Aryani and Prasetyo (2024) highlight that this approach improves expenditure traceability, allows for the identification of operational inefficiencies, and strengthens transparency in budgetary management, being especially relevant in service and manufacturing organizations with complex processes.

Taken together, the discussion of the findings reveals that budget execution is transitioning from a predominantly technical and financial-control vision toward a strategic, flexible, and comprehensive conception. Emerging models —such as ZBB, Beyond Budgeting, and ABB— not only respond to efficiency demands but also to growing demands for transparency, agility, and organizational sustainability. Nevertheless, their effective adoption requires overcoming cultural barriers, strengthening institutional capacities, and having committed leadership that drives a paradigm shift in budgetary management.

Conclusions

The systematic review of scientific articles published between 2008 and 2025 made evident a substantive transformation in budget execution approaches, characterized by a transition from traditional, rigid models predominantly oriented toward financial control toward more strategic, flexible proposals focused on organizational value creation. This change responds to the need to adapt budgetary systems to increasingly dynamic, complex, and uncertain environments.

The results show that emerging models such as Beyond Budgeting, zero-based budgeting (ZBB), and activity-based budgeting (ABB) are consolidating as relevant alternatives to the limitations of the traditional approach. These proposals stand out for their capacity to promote efficiency in resource allocation, strengthen organizational agility, and improve the alignment of the budget with institutional strategic objectives. Likewise, the reviewed literature highlights a growing linkage between budgeting and strategy, as well as the use of diverse methodological approaches that allow the budgetary phenomenon to be addressed from multiple dimensions.

Collectively, the findings provide a solid theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the budget not only as a technical instrument of financial planning but also as a tool for strategic management and organizational transformation. This expanded conception is particularly pertinent in contexts demanding higher levels of efficiency, transparency, sustainability, and adaptive capacity.

Finally, the review reveals the need to deepen future research on budget execution, raising key questions that guide new lines of inquiry: (1) What internal factors condition or limit the transition from traditional budgetary models toward more agile and strategic approaches? (2) What are the main cultural, structural, or institutional barriers hindering the adoption of alternative models? (3) How can budget execution evolve toward a predictive and preventive approach, overcoming a merely reactive logic? and (4) In what ways can the integration of technological tools and information systems strengthen the traceability, evaluation, and continuous improvement of budgetary processes? Addressing these questions will allow progress toward the consolidation of budgetary systems more coherent with contemporary demands of management and organizational governance.

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DECLARATIONS

Authorship contribution

The authors declare that the activities of conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, resource provision, validation, and writing —including proofreading and

editing— were carried out jointly and responsibly, meeting the necessary criteria to ensure the scientific, methodological, and ethical rigor of the research.

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Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest, whether financial, institutional, or personal, that could have unduly influenced the preparation, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of the results of this study.

Declaration on the use of artificial intelligence

The authors declare that, during the manuscript writing process, generative artificial intelligence tools were used exclusively as support for linguistic tasks, such as improving style, syntactic organization, and grammatical correction. In no case were these tools used to generate original scientific content, interpret results, perform analyses, or substitute for the authors' academic, methodological, and ethical judgment. Full responsibility for the integrity, validity, and originality of the manuscript rests exclusively with the authors, in accordance with good editorial practices and the ethical principles of scientific publication internationally recognized.