

Strategic plans in municipal management: a review of their dimensions and limitations

Planes estratégicos en la gestión municipal: una revisión de sus dimensiones y limitaciones

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INFORMACIÓN DEL ARTÍCULO

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Abstract

This study reviewed the scientific literature on strategic plans in municipal management: a review of their dimensions and limitations. Using the PRISMA methodology, 21 studies indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and ProQuest were analyzed. Initially, 5,538 documents were found between 2018-2024, of which, after the inclusion and exclusion processes, the most relevant were systematized. The results highlight that dimensions such as transparency and efficiency generate resource management. However, significant limitations persist, including lack of technical capacities, dependence on collaborators, unfavorable structures and low adaptation to new technologies. The findings also emphasize the importance of aligning municipal budgets with strategic plan performance. This study concludes that, despite existing barriers, municipalities can improve strategic plan implementation and adaptability through appropriate tools and evidence-based planning approaches to enhance institutional performance and service delivery.

Keywords:

Strategic plans; municipal management; transparency; efficiency; systematic review, local development, SDG 16.

JEL Classification: H70, H72 y H83.

Resumen

Este estudio revisó la literatura científica sobre planes estratégicos en la gestión municipal: una revisión de sus dimensiones y limitaciones. Utilizando la metodología PRISMA, se analizaron 21 estudios indexados en Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect y ProQuest. Inicialmente, se identificaron 5538 documentos publicados entre 2018 y 2024, de los cuales, tras los procesos de inclusión y exclusión, se sistematizaron los más relevantes. Los resultados muestran que dimensiones como la transparencia y la eficiencia generan la gestión de recursos. Mientras que las limitaciones presentadas fueron la capacidad técnica limitada, la dependencia de los colaboradores, las estructuras organizativas desfavorables y la escasa adaptación a las nuevas tecnologías. Los resultados también destacan la importancia de alinear los presupuestos del desempeño de los planes estratégicos. El estudio concluye que, a pesar de las barreras existentes, los municipios pueden mejorar la implementación y la adaptabilidad de los planes estratégicos mediante herramientas adecuadas y enfoques de planificación basados en la evidencia para mejorar el rendimiento institucional y la prestación de servicios.

Palabras Clave:

Planes estratégicos; gestión municipal; transparencia; eficiencia; revisión sistemática; desarrollo local; ODS 16.

Clasificación JEL : H70, H72 y H83.

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Introduction

Municipal management is facing increasingly complex challenges in an environment marked by globalization, accelerated urbanization, and growing citizen demand for efficient and transparent services (Eakin et al., 2022; Song et al., 2023). In this context, strategic plans have become fundamental tools to guide the actions of local governments towards meeting their development objectives and meeting the needs of the population (da Cruz et al., 2019; Manta & Mansi, 2024). However, the implementation and effectiveness of these plans are not without difficulties, which raises questions about the key dimensions that constitute them and the limitations they face in their practical application. Strategic plans in municipal management seek to provide a roadmap that guides the decisions of local authorities in critical areas such as urban development, resource management, citizen participation, and technological innovation (Lafioune et al., 2023). However, variability in institutional capacity, diversity of socioeconomic contexts, and financial and regulatory constraints are factors that can limit the success of these plans (Ordóñez-Ponce, 2021).

Over the last few decades, numerous studies have been carried out that address strategic planning in municipal management (Khaw et al., 2022), exploring topics such as citizen participation, resource management, and technological innovation (Guyadeen et al., 2023). However, these studies tend to

focus on specific cases or partial evaluations, without offering a comprehensive view of the dimensions that make up strategic plans or the limitations they face in their practical application (Pegan, 2023). In addition, the lack of a systematic analysis that integrates and synthesizes the available evidence has left a gap in the academic literature, hindering the development of effective strategies that can be replicated or adapted in different contexts.

This problem is aggravated by considering that, in many municipalities, strategic plans fail to transcend from paper to practice, due to factors such as insufficient financial resources, lack of institutional capacity, resistance to change on the part of the actors involved, and lack of effective leadership (Mettler et al., 2024). These limitations not only put the implementation of the plans at risk but also call into question their ability to contribute to sustainable development and the improvement of the quality of life of the population (Roslan et al., 2021).

Faced with this situation, this systematic review is proposed as a pioneering effort, being the first study that comprehensively addresses the issue of strategic plans in municipal management from this methodological perspective. Through the PICO method, the population is defined as municipal governments and their administrations; the Intervention focuses on the implementation of strategic plans; The comparator includes those municipalities without formal strategic plans or that

adopt alternative management approaches; and the results focus on the identification of key dimensions (such as planning, participation, and evaluation) and on the limitations observed in the literature, such as lack of resources, resistance to change, and lack of effective leadership (Veli et al., 2022).

The study not only aims to fill a gap in the academic literature, but also to offer a critical and comprehensive perspective that allows public managers and academics to identify areas for improvement. As the first systematic analysis of its kind, the findings are expected to contribute significantly to the strengthening of municipal management through more effective strategic plans adapted to local realities, thus promoting sustainable development and the optimization of public management at the local level. To address these issues, the present review responds to the following research question: What dimensions constitute strategic plans in municipal management, and what limitations hinder their effective implementation?

Thus, the objective of this systematic review is to analyze and synthesize the existing literature on strategic plans in municipal management. In addition, it sought to identify a) the dimensions of strategic plans in municipal management, b) describe the strategic plans applied in the public sector, c) identify the success factors of strategic plans in municipal management, d) identify the levels of strategic planning in municipal management and e) describe the limitations in the implementation of

strategic plans in municipal management.

Theoretical framework

Strategic plans

Strategic plans are management instruments designed to define the long-term direction of an organization and guide decision-making through structured objectives and coordinated actions. At the institutional level, these plans serve as foundational documents that integrate the organizational vision, mission, and strategic goals into actionable steps aligned with available resources. Their purpose is to provide a coherent roadmap that enables institutions to operate with clarity, continuity, and a long-term orientation.

According to Ordóñez-Ponce (2021), is a systematic process that involves the analysis of the internal and external environment, strategy formulation, implementation and evaluation of results. This approach allows organizations to anticipate changes, adapt to challenges and optimize resource allocation.

Furthermore, strategic plans constitute a central mechanism for organizational adaptability; they enable institutions to anticipate change, optimize resource allocation, and improve operational efficiency by promoting informed, evidence-based decisions. In public entities, such as municipalities, contribute to administrative modernization, promote transparency, and strengthen institutional capacity. As such, they are not only procedural

documents but also tools to enhance governance and ensure continuity in public management across political cycles.

Municipal management

The set of administrative, political and technical processes through which municipalities organize and manage public resources to meet the collective needs of their jurisdiction (Song et al., 2023). This management includes the planning, execution, supervision and evaluation of programs and projects aimed at local development, as well as the provision of basic services such as water, sanitation, public safety, infrastructure and land use planning.

From an administrative perspective, municipal management encompasses a series of interconnected activities, including planning, budgeting, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs. These activities must be aligned with national regulatory frameworks and adapted to local realities, which often present heterogeneous socioeconomic, demographic, and geographic conditions. As a result, municipal management requires not only technical capacity but also the ability to coordinate multiple stakeholders and navigate political dynamics.

Additionally, modern approaches to municipal management emphasize transparency, citizen participation, and digital transformation as essential components of local governance. Municipalities are increasingly expected

to adopt strategic planning tools, performance-based management systems, and open-government practices to ensure accountability and efficiency. These demands underscore the importance of strengthening institutional capacity and fostering innovation to improve service delivery and enhance public trust in local authorities.

Methodology

Research design

The study has been developed considering the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta Analyses (PRISMA) protocol, which allows bibliographical information to be synthesized in scientific databases (Page et al., 2021). This protocol ensures clarity in the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies, thereby strengthening the replicability and credibility of the review.

In addition, in order to make an exhaustive search, four databases were considered (Monroe et al., 2019). This approach allows for the integration of diverse perspectives, methodological approaches, and geographical contexts relevant to strategic planning in municipal management.

Search strategy

The Scopus, Web Of Science, ScienceDirect and ProQuest databases were considered in the last seven years (2018–2024). The search terms were "Strategic plans, Municipal development

"Strategic plans, Municipal development plans, Municipal strategies, Strategic planning, Municipal management, Local government, Public administration, Local governance". Similarly, Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used (Alharbi & Stevenson, 2020; MacFarlane et al., 2022). The results of the search processes are shown in Table 1.

Document selection criteria and processes

For the study, quantitative and qualitative studies published in the last seven years (2018–2024), studies developed in public institutions, which have addressed variables as a central theme, and all those studies to which open access could be available, were considered as inclusion criteria. Thus, grey literature (theses, blogs, etc.), letters to the editor, studies that did not go through a declared peer review in order to

found 17718 documents in the four databases, after the temporal selection they were left with only 8431 articles. In addition, describing only journals and articles were reviewed, 2127 articles were reviewed and the title review evidenced 61 articles eligible to be systematized. After the review of the full-text abstracts, only 21 articles were eligible.

Document coding and analysis

For the coding process, documentary analysis was considered as a tool (Bracho et al., 2021). The data collection matrix was designed, where the author and year, country, sample, collection instruments and the results of the formulated objectives that have been found were recorded, while Microsoft Excel ® was available for a better understanding and synthesis of the information respectively.

Table 1.
Database search process

Database	Search equation
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Strategic plan *" OR "Municipal development plans" OR "Municipal strategies" OR "Strategic planning" AND "Municipal management" OR "Local government" OR "Public administration" OR "Local governance") (((((((TI=(Strategic plans)) OR TI=(Municipal development plans)) OR TI=(Municipal strategies)) OR TI=(Strategic planning)) AND TI=(Municipal management)) OR TI=(Local government)) OR TI=(Public administration)) OR TI=(Local governance)
Web Of Science	Title, abstract, keywords: (Desing strategic plans OR Municipal strategies OR Strategic planning) AND (Municipal management OR Public administration OR Local governance)
ScienceDirect	Title: (Strategic plans OR Municipal development plans OR Municipal strategies OR Strategic planning) AND (Municipal management OR Local government OR Public administration OR Local gove rnance)
ProQuest	title("Desing strategic plans") OR title("Municipal strategies") OR title("Strategic planning") AND title("Municipal management") OR title("Public administration") OR title("Local governance")

Source: Elaborated by author.

Results

Table 2 shows that strategic plans in municipal management rely mainly on dimensions such as transparency,

efficiency, and performance-based budgeting. The studies indicate that while strategic plans can improve public management, their success depends on clear objectives, strong governance, and

Table 2.
Synthesis of Results on Strategic Plans in Municipal Management

Category	Main Findings
Dimensions of strategic plans	Transparency, efficiency, performance-based budgeting alignment, structured decision-making, adaptability of organizational processes.
Strategic plans implemented in the public sector	Optimization of asset management, resource prioritization, outsourcing relevance, variability of municipal capacity, importance of contextualized implementation.
Success factors in municipal strategic plans	Clear objectives, effective action plans, innovation, robust infrastructure, governance mechanisms, appropriate financial management, leadership support, technological and administrative capacity.
Levels of strategic planning	Three key stages: formulation, implementation, and evaluation; formulation identified as the most critical stage where municipal failures commonly occur.
Limitations in implementation	Insufficient technical capacity, budget constraints, dependence on collaborators, resistance to change, weak inter-institutional communication, lack of external support, unfavorable governance structures, insufficient human and technological resources.

Source: Elaborated by author.

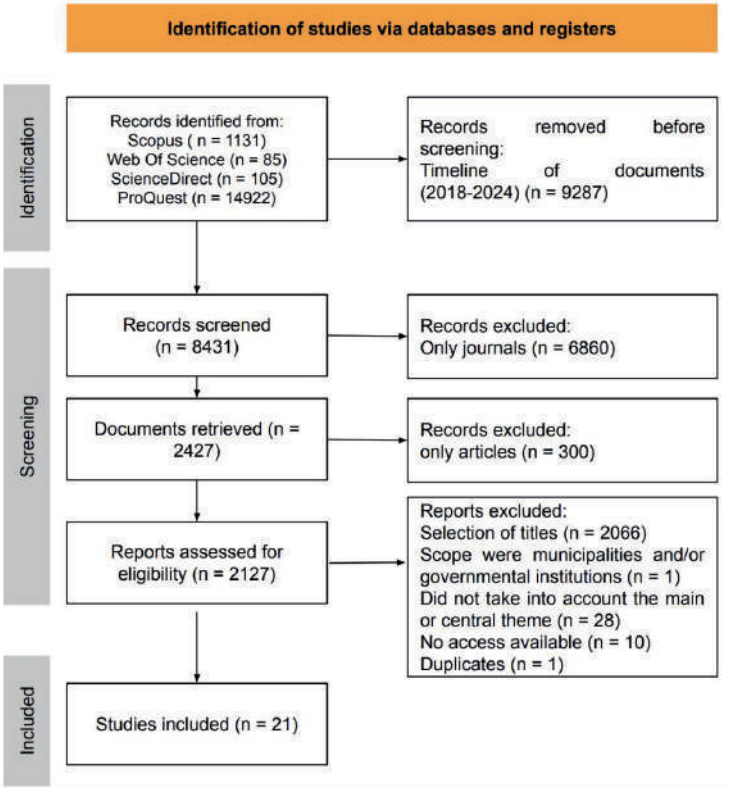


Figure 1. Selection of articles according to PRISMA.
Source: Elaborated by author.

adequate technical and financial capacity. However, municipalities continue to face major limitations; including lack of skills, budget restrictions, and resistance to change, that hinder effective implementation. Overall, the evidence suggests that strengthening institutional capacity is essential for improving strategic planning in local governments.

Dimensions of strategic plans in municipal management

According to Eckerd et al. (2019), strategic plans in municipal management are due to a broad and disciplined effort, and they are also the ones that guide the organization in order to adapt the decision-making that guides the organization. On the other hand, the alignment between performance-based budgeting and strategic planning highlights dimensions such as transparency and efficiency in resource management for municipalities (Čajková & Šindleryová, 2022).

Strategic plans implemented in the public sector

Mykytyuk et al. (2021) report that within the strategic plans applied is the need to optimize the development of strategic planning due to the effective management of assets, in addition to the concentration of resources on main activities, prioritizing important tasks, which allows increasing the efficiency of the operation of the public administration system and minimizing the costs of extra support functions. However, the high degree of relevance of the outsourcing of

management processes also allows for greater grounding in the methods or plans for implementation.

Municipal capacity tends to carry out its own functions and tasks as goals that municipalities must meet in an effective, efficient and sustainable manner, and varies considerably according to the prolonged time, depending on each local context or situation in which they find themselves, so that they evaluate the relevance in order to be able to apply strategic plans that allow them to be formalized as a strategy of the state government for the construction of a structure centralized (Lagunes et al., 2022).

Success factors of strategic plans in municipal management

Aydın et al. (2020) point out that the factors for strategic plans are to have well-defined objectives and goals and to take into account that we must comply, having an action plan allows the organization of the distribution of resources and deadlines, having a well-designed and effective implementation plan ensures the success of the fulfillment of strategic plans. On the other hand, (Eckerd et al., 2019) mentions that the factors that allow success are innovation and equity, infrastructure is a solid basis for the distribution and operationalization of activities that are developed in a productive way, there is also the development of governance that indicates the policies, responsibilities and decision-making that direct the

organization to meet the objectives and finally financial management, management and management. adequate distribution of budget management.

On the other hand, Bert (2020) argues that EPs should not be considered as the only solution for the formulation of strategies, but also highlights that their success depends on the adaptation of the plan to the particularities of people, processes and implementation. However, it is essential that there are other factors that influence the success of strategic management in municipalities, such as leadership support by monitoring each employee, clarity of objectives, and administrative and technological capacity to be updated, in constant training, which are essential for the success of strategic implementation in municipalities (Dimitrijevska et al., 2021).

In such a way, da Silva & de Aguiar (2023) highlights that the evolution of the planning process and perception stands out in professionals, and the capacity of local governments is also reflected by the evolution of planning processes. Likewise, Zarić et al. (2023) propose that the semantic description of the development strategy, involving stakeholders and using tools that allow optimizing decision-making, to improve the process in the selection of the most valuable strategic objectives for the region's economy.

The application of good governance principles and the implementation of policies and actions that promote transparency, generate citizen

participation in the process of elaboration and implementation of local development strategies correlates with evaluations of the suitability of the strategy as a development management tool (Guzal et al., 2020). Thus, strategic planning in the public sector has shown how the instrument of the Multiannual Plan (PPA), in local governments, is recurrently structured from a purely technical-budgetary perspective, or simply as an obligation, with little evidence of its potential strategic use in municipal public management (Rodrigues et al., 2020). Finally, Agger (2021) warns that the effects of guest spaces in the form of formal local platforms for collaboration between public and private actors aimed at creating innovative climate policy solutions, an international resurgence of interest in institutional innovations for public participation, and a growing literature on democratic innovation.

Levels of strategic planning in municipal management

Strategic planning is essential because it is part of the process that today allows it to be carried out in most entities, both public or private, it is the action of proposing an objective and fulfilling it in the path that must be followed to achieve it; this process contains three stages: The first is the formulation, second is implementation and third we have evaluation; the stage in which strategic planning is developed is the formulation, this stage is decisive, since it is about capturing what is going to be done or applied; and it is at this point that almost

all public administration entities fail, without a clear idea of what they want to achieve to begin with, it is illogical to think that the proposed objective will be achieved (Taica et al., 2023).

Limitations in the implementation of strategic plans in municipal management

One of the main shortcomings in strategic plans is the limitations that arise, such as the lack of technical capacities and the complexity of the budget delivery process, which generates significant barriers to the effective implementation of strategic plans in municipal management (Čajková & Šindleryová, 2022). They highlight that these limitations prevent planned strategies from being executed efficiently, affecting the ability of local governments to meet their objectives. Likewise, (Назаров & Афиногенов, 2022) points out that these restrictions are common that limit effectiveness, which points to a common problem in municipal ones with technical and budgetary obstructions.

On the other hand, dependence on the support of collaborators is another limitation that recurs in the implementation of strategic plans. (Mitchell, 2023) states that the effectiveness of strategic and political aspects is supported by these key actors. Likewise, (İkizer, 2023) mentions that political and organizational barriers are limited by resistance to change, the lack of inter-institutional communication, which ends up generating insufficiency in strategic implementation.

In the same way, Johnsen (2021) mentions that perception and formality have certain barriers that we cannot ignore, these are not always related to the perceived usefulness of EP when mandatory documents are used, which could reduce practical effectiveness in municipal management. Similarly, (Guyadeen et al., 2023) note that municipalities lack high-quality characteristics and their evaluation framework is strictly focused on plans, without taking into account the lack of external support in terms of financial allocations, political commitment, and community support. Finally, Pegan (2023) and Lee et al. (2023) focus on unfavorable structures as a limitation, they also mention that insufficient administrative capacity and the lack of integration of civil society and the general private sector are obstacles to the execution of the plans, they also point out that the lack of adequate human, technological and physical resources, generate the deficiency in various contexts of strategic management.

Discussion

In the literature review on strategic plans in municipal management, several critical dimensions were identified that affect both their formulation and implementation. However, Gandrita, (2023) highlights that strategic plans are the pillar that guides municipal organizations, allowing adaptation in decision-making. On the other hand, one of the most important challenges in implementation is the alignment of performance-based budgeting with

strategic planning (Quiroz et al., 2020).

The strategic plans applied in the public sector have certain particularities. Berrocal et al. (2023) report that the optimization of strategic planning is important for effective asset management, prioritizing key activities that improve efficiency and reducing additional expenses. However, strategic planning has been criticized for being too rational, which could limit flexibility and the ability to adapt to changes and limit innovative strategic thinking, in addition to the fact that the positive impact within organizational planning is stronger when measured by effectiveness and planning (George et al., 2019).

Regarding the success factors in the implementation of strategic plans, (Mubanga & Lesa, 2024), they refer that it is essential to have the importance of having well-defined objectives and goals, a clear action plan and an efficient distribution of resources and deadlines, which mentions that these factors allow the success of strategic plans in municipal management. On the other hand, Nesterenko (2023) adds that the relationship between management levels is more effective within a municipal organization, with fluid communication and the participation of innovation, equity and a solid infrastructure are essential for the effective operationalization of activities, while da Silva & de Aguiar (2023) They argue that the plan's adaptability to the particularities of people and processes is crucial to success, such as workers' perceptions and managerial decisions.

Similarly, (Quiroz et al., 2020) emphasize that factors such as leadership support, clarity of objectives, and administrative and technological capacity are vital for successful implementation in municipalities.

However, the implementation of strategic plans in municipal management is not without limitations, identifying the lack of technical capacities and the complexity in the budgeting process as significant barriers that prevent the effective execution of strategic plans, these limitations affect the ability of local governments to achieve their objectives, evidencing a recurring problem in municipal contexts with technical and (Franco, 2016). They also highlight dependence on government support and political and organizational barriers as factors limiting the effectiveness of implementation, pointing to resistance to change and lack of inter-institutional communication as critical challenges (Quiroz, 2022).

In addition, Cercado et al. (2024) highlight that the lack of a comprehensive approach that considers both detailed plans and external support mechanisms, as well as financial allocations and political commitment, the omission of these elements can generate the deficiency of strategic plans, limiting the capacity of municipalities to achieve the objectives set and ultimately compromising the sustainability of municipal initiatives. This perspective highlights the importance of a holistic approach in municipal strategic planning, highlighting the challenges faced and the

opportunities that open up in the process whose purpose is to meet the needs of citizens (Rico, 2020).

Finally, Song et al. (2023) emphasize unfavorable structures as a critical limitation, noting that insufficient administrative capacity, lack of integration of civil society and the private sector, as well as lack of human, technological, and physical resources, are major obstacles to the effective implementation of strategic plans. These findings indicate that there is a need to strengthen internal capacities and promote greater collaboration between all actors involved in municipal management, so that a better application is generated in accordance with the structures and modify their administrative capacity that allows them to adapt to complicated situations and can be faced in the most efficient way. These processes increase municipal autonomy relative to other planning scales, despite the problems observed in the municipality-centered, market-driven planning orientation (Hytönen & Ahlqvist, 2019). The literature reviewed highlights the implementation of strategic plans in municipal management, emphasizing the importance of considering both the key dimensions of planning and the structural and contextual limitations that may influence the success or failure of these efforts.

Conclusions

The results of the study highlight the importance of strategic planning in municipal management, emphasizing the

need to align plans with resource management to ensure transparency and efficiency. The correct formulation and adaptation of plans to local needs and administrative capacity are essential for their success. However, implementation faces barriers such as lack of technical capabilities, budgetary issues, and resistance to change.

Regarding future scope, the research proposes that additional studies be carried out to delve into the relationship between administrative capacity and efficiency in the implementation of strategic plans in different municipal contexts. In addition, it would be beneficial to further explore how the participation of civil society and the private sector can strengthen the implementation of municipal strategies, which could help overcome the barriers. The evaluation of new technologies and methodologies to improve inter-institutional communication and resource management is also presented as an area of interest for future research, to improve the resilience and adaptability of strategic plans in municipalities.

This study also presents limitations that should be considered. The review focuses on studies published between 2018 and 2024, which may exclude earlier contributions relevant to historical changes in municipal management. The analysis is also limited to articles indexed in major databases, potentially omitting valuable evidence from regional or non-indexed sources. Moreover, the absence of quantitative meta-analysis restricts the ability to measure effect sizes

across the reviewed dimensions. Future research could explore comparative analyses between municipalities with varying levels of administrative capacity, examine the influence of political leadership on strategic plan success, or assess the impact of digital transformation on local governance. Additionally, further studies could evaluate how participatory mechanisms and cross-sectoral collaborations enhance the sustainability of municipal strategies.

In conclusion, strengthening strategic planning in municipal management requires an integrated approach that combines technical competence, institutional coordination, and stakeholder engagement. By addressing structural and contextual limitations identified in this review, municipalities can improve the effectiveness, adaptability, and long-term impact of their strategic plans, contributing to more resilient and efficient local governance.

Authors contribution

CDRB: Conceptualization, data curation, Investigation; Methodology; Writing - original draft; drafting - review and edition.

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