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Article

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Rebudgeting: scope, triggers, players

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1. Introduction

The current crisis of public finances and the context of austerity require a rethinking of governmental budgets' roles, processes, and contents. On the one hand, increasing pressures exist to cut back expenditure and reduce the amount of accumulated public debt. On the other, governments are required to respond to citizen expectations and pursue economic growth. Public budgets are central to such trends, but are experiencing a significant change in the way they are conceived, used, perceived by players.

Public budgets have traditionally been viewed as major accountability and governance tools, playing a central role in a country's

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economy and in public sector management, allocating financial resources among multiple and competing interests, and ensuring the balance of powers among and within governments (Wildavsky, 1964). The central phase of the budgetary process was budget formulation and approval, according to the bureaucratic view whereby the budget would then be mechanically executed. As a consequence, much research focused on budget approval, studying the underlying antecedents, the related processes, actors and outputs. Much less attention was devoted to budget execution and to budget adjustments (i.e. “rebudgeting”) that take place during the year. Budgeting and rebudgeting, in particular, were seen as two separate moments and phases.

Beginning in the 1980s, the processes of public-sector modernization and the increasing interdependence between the public and the private spheres, as well as among public entities, have required governments to fine-tune their budgeting systems in order to achieve better financial and non-financial performances. This has translated into an increased recognition of managerial autonomy, a strengthened role for executive bodies, and a stronger attention towards stakeholder involvement in the budgeting process.

More recently, the need to improve and redesign budgeting systems has further increased. The expanding weight of entitlements, the demands of supra- and inter-national institutions and the recent fiscal and economic crises have put enormous pressures on cutting back expenditure and ensuring balanced budgets. Public entities are expected to meet an increasingly sophisticated and heterogeneous demand for services and to play a role towards economic recovery and growth.

As a consequence, reaching a consensus on specific resource allocation decisions becomes more and more complex and translates into fragmented and continuous bargaining.

This may become even more evident and true in the present context, where the ongoing strengthening of European governance and re-centralization of National governments are reducing the financial autonomy of decentralized public entities, such as local and regional governments and agencies. As a consequence, budget approval is continuously postponed and budgets, at least informally, are intended to cover ever shorter periods of time. Moreover, the decision making process

becomes more fragmented and affected by sudden changes in revenue forecasts and by the emergence of new and ever-changing constraints.

The phenomena described above have amplified the uncertainty surrounding budget approval and execution, further blurring the boundaries between these two phases of the budgeting process. A recent study (Anessi-Pessina et al. 2012) shows that budgeting and rebudgeting are, indeed, profoundly interconnected.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate rebudgeting practices by looking at Italian municipalities. More specifically, the paper aims at answering the following questions: i) what are the main reasons for rebudgeting? ii) what are the roles of the various players (politicians, managers and other stakeholders) in rebudgeting processes? iii) how does rebudgeting affect a municipality's planning and control system?

Section 2 sums up the existing literature. Section 3 offers a short background on Italian municipalities, their accounting systems and their rebudgeting rules. Section 4 illustrates the methods used. Section 5 presents the empirical findings. Section 6, finally, draws some conclusions.

2. Literature review

Traditionally, the literature on budgeting has focused on the annual budgetary process (Wildasky 1964; Fenno 1966; Rubin 1990, 2005), up until the budget's formal approval, investigating such themes as the players involved, their roles, the internal and external factors influencing budget characteristics. Much less attention has been paid to budget execution, that is, the implementation of the budget during the fiscal year. Since Pitsvada's (1983) call for further research, not much has been published on this issue (Dougherty et al. 2003).

A fundamental feature of budget execution is budget flexibility, which allows governments to revise the budget in order to incorporate changing priorities and face unexpected events. The process whereby governments revise and update the adopted budget during the fiscal year is called "rebudgeting" (Forrester e Mullins 1992; Dougherty et al. 2003). Rebudgeting is a way for governments to meet the varied objectives of budgeting, including continuity and control, change and accountability,

flexibility and predictability. Therefore, it is allowed in most public organisations worldwide, although within different sets of constraints. Despite its potentially large impact on appropriations, only few studies have investigated it.

The existing studies, moreover, have predominantly adopted an exploratory and descriptive approach (Forrester and Mullins 1992; Dougherty et al. 2003). They usually investigate the importance / magnitude of budget revisions, the players who initiate the revision process or are otherwise involved, the contingencies, events and reasons that are more likely to cause it, at the local and state levels.

According to these studies, not only does rebudgeting significantly affect the original appropriations (Abu Tuha 1979; Hoskins 1983), but it also influences future budget cycles (Lee and Plummer 2007; Lauth 1988; Dougherty et al. 2003). For example, economic growth and conservative underestimating of revenues contribute to surpluses that are added to budgetary appropriations and may favour the parochial interests of legislators (Lauth 1988).

Along these lines, Dougherty et al (2003) investigated the rebudgeting process in 15 West Virginia cities and found an “increase-then-decrease” pattern, with statistically significant mean differences between the original and the revised appropriations and between the revised appropriations and the actual outlays, but not between the original appropriations and the actual outlays. This pattern expresses a conscious strategy adopted by municipalities to ensure a buffer against unexpected events and to keep expenditures under their budgeted levels.

As to the players, their roles and their motivations, Forrester and Mullins (1992) carried out a survey of 91 US central cities. According to their results, rebudgeting is generally less visible than budgeting to the general public, and is driven more by administrative than political bodies. It can be stimulated by managerial necessity, political concerns, or environmental pressures and it affects differently the various governmental services and functions.

So far, the international literature on rebudgeting has thus predominantly adopted an exploratory stance and focused on the US context. A recent notable exception is Anessi-Pessina et al (2012), who have used Italian data to show the presence of significant complementarities between budgeting and rebudgeting.

3. Background: Italian municipalities and rebudgeting

Italy has four levels of government: the central government, 20 regions, about 100 provinces, and about 8100 municipalities. Each level has jurisdiction over several policy areas.

With specific respect to municipalities, each has a mayor, a cabinet, a city council, and a professional bureaucracy. The mayor is the head of the executive, is elected directly by the population, and appoints the aldermen. In addition, (s)he must appoint a secretary general and can also choose to appoint a CEO (or “City Manager”) with general-management responsibilities. The city council is the municipality’s “legislature” and is also elected directly by the population. Elections are held every five years, although early elections may be called under special circumstances such as the mayor’s death, resignation, or removal for major criminal violations.

Municipalities are allowed to raise local taxes and charge tariffs for the services they provide, but a significant percentage of their inflows is still accounted for by transfers from higher levels of government, especially in low-income areas of the country.

From an accounting viewpoint, municipalities still rely predominantly on cash and commitment-based budgetary accounting, although they are technically expected to also publish an accrual-based financial statement (Anessi-Pessina and Steccolini 2007). The budget is commitment-based, must be approved by the council, and is required to balance. Budgeted revenues include borrowing which, however, can only be used to cover capital spending. Past-year surpluses may be added to budgeted revenues, while past-year deficits must be added to budgeted expenditures. The fiscal year coincides with the calendar year.

Rebudgeting rules (Table 1) require the budget to remain balanced. Increased budgeted expenditures for a given line item must therefore be offset by (i) decreased budgeted expenditures for other line items, and/or (ii) increased budgeted revenues. All revisions must generally be approved by the council no later than November 30, although exceptions exist (budgeted expenditures include an item for “reserves” from which transfers can be made to other expenditure items; the cabinet may revise the budget by executive order under specific circumstances). Budget

revisions occur throughout the year, but are particularly frequent in two periods: July, after the publication of the previous year's report, in order to revise the amount of surplus / deficit carried over from the previous year; November, just before the November 30 deadline, to make all the remaining changes that are deemed necessary.

Table 1 – Rules for rebudgeting in Italian municipalities

Types of adjustments	Definition	Body responsible for approval	Deadline
Transfer	Funds are transferred between spending items. Total budgeted expenditures remain unchanged.	Council	30 Nov
Use of new or larger-than-expected revenues	Budgeted revenues are increased. Budgeted expenditures can thus be increased by the same amount.	Council	30 Nov
Use of reserves	Funds are moved from the "reserve" item to other spending items. Total budgeted expenditures remain unchanged.	Cabinet	31 Dec

4. Methods

In order to investigate rebudgeting a questionnaire was sent out by post between March and July 2010 to the CFOs of the 176 Italian municipalities with over 40,000 local residents. 81 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 45.5%.

The questionnaire is divided into five sections.

The first section investigates the types of adjustments(transfers, use of new or increased revenue, use of reserve funds) used in order to revise the budget⁴.

The second section investigates how certain players are involved in the preparation of the initial budget, drawing a distinction between current and capital spending. The players considered are: the mayor, the

⁴ Adjustments emerging after the approval of the previous year's financial statement, and consequently resulting from the possibility or necessity to amend the surplus carried over, are considered as an additional type of adjustment, although technically falling within the category of "larger-than-expected revenues".

alderman for finance, other aldermen, majority councillors, opposition councillors, the secretary general, the CEO if any, the CFO, other managers, local business associations, other local associations and citizens. A five-point Likert scale was used to indicate the level of involvement.

The third section investigates the role these actors play in the rebudgeting process, again using a five-point Likert scale. It investigates the following for each category of actors and separately for current and capital spending: (i) involvement in the rebudgeting process; (ii) actual ability to promote specific rebudgeting initiatives; (iii) actual ability to hinder specific budgeting initiatives.

The fourth section investigates the reasons for rebudgeting. More specifically, it uses a 5-point Likert scale to indicate the frequency of the events that stimulate the use of rebudgeting.

The fifth section investigates the impact of rebudgeting on the planning and control process, asking the respondent to indicate a level of agreement or disagreement with a series of statements, again using a 5-point Likert scale.

5. Results

Only 68 of the 81 respondents (84%) completed the first section of the questionnaire (Table 2). The most frequently used type of adjustment (on average 5.3 times per year) is the reserves, especially during December. This has two explanations. First, after November 30 the other types of adjustments are no longer allowed (see Table 1). Second, use of reserves is the executive's prerogative: the mayor and the aldermen may allocate them to their pet projects, hopefully after verifying the overall solidity of the budget a few days before the end of the financial year.

By frequency of use the second type of adjustment (on average 4.9 times per year) is the transfer. Unexpectedly, the use of new or larger-than-expected revenues is also very frequent (on average 3.9 per year), which apparently contradicts the widespread notion whereby budgeted revenues are often initially overestimated in order to balance the budget. Rebudgeting involving changes in the surplus carried over happens on

average 1.6 times a year, probably due to the common practice of not indicating the surplus at all in the initial budget.

Table 2 Frequency of rebudgeting by type of adjustment (number of adjustments per year)

	Average per municipality		Two-year average
	2007	2008	
Transfer	5.029	4.721	4.875
Use of new or larger-than-expected revenues	4.059	3.706	3.882
Reserves	5.235	5.353	5.294
Use of surplus	1.529	1.676	1.603

Table 3 shows the roles played by the different actors in rebudgeting processes. These results can be analysed with two complementary readings. A reading by column identifies different decision-making processes (budgeting and rebudgeting) and, as regards rebudgeting, different modes of participation (involvement, ability to promote approval of the adjustment, ability to hinder approval of the adjustment), also differentiating between current and capital spending: hereinafter, we refer to different «budget decisions» for the sake of simplicity. Therefore, for each budget decision, the reading by column assesses and compares the roles played by the different actors. The reading by row, on the other hand, compares the roles played by each category of actors across the various budget decisions. In both cases, it is worth emphasising that the data reflects the CFOs' perceptions.

In the reading by column, the various categories of actors are divided into three groups: the mayor, the aldermen for finance and the CFO have high influence; the other aldermen, majority councillors, the secretary general, the CEO and other managers are moderately influential; the minority councillors, local business- and other associations and citizens have little influence.

Focusing on the first group, the Dunnett 3 test for multiple comparisons in case of unequal variance between groups did not reveal any statistically-significant differences between the mayor and the alderman for finance, or between the latter and the CFO. However, statistically-significant differences were found between the mayor and the

CFO: the latter is more involved in the rebudgeting process for current expenditures, whereas the former has more ability to influence revisions to capital spending, promoting their adoption.

As regards the role played by each actor in the various budget decisions (reading Table 3 by row), a first important result is that no statistically-significant differences exist between current and capital spending for each category of actors and for each type of decision (for example, the role of the mayor during the drafting of the initial budget).

Referring specifically to the individual actors, there are some statistically-significant differences in the role played by the mayor with regard to the various budget decisions. The mayor exercises most influence when defining the allocation of funds for capital spending in the initial budget, however (s)he has much less involvement in the rebudgeting process and most of all has little ability to hinder the adoption of a proposed change. The latter finding is also true for most other categories of actors (and is generally the only statistically-significant result): the alderman for finance, the other aldermen, the CFO, and the other managers. This leads us to conclude that adjustments are proposed only when the necessary consensus has already been reached or perhaps because the change is often simply an acknowledgement of events whose outcome and impact have already become inevitable.

The few other statistically-significant differences include the limited ability of the CFO to promote the approval of changes to capital spending.

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Table 3 Role of the various actors in rebudgeting (min 1, max 5)

	Budget decisions							
	Current expenditure				Capital expenditure			
	Initial budget	Adjustments			Initial budget	Adjustments		
		Involve- ment	Impact (promoting)	Impact (hindering)		Involve- ment	Impact (promoting)	Impact (hindering)
Mayor	4.050	3.795	4.195	3.729	4.333	4.091	4.372	3.843
Alderman for finance	4.200	4.090	4.156	3.652	4.050	4.141	4.115	3.600
Other aldermen	3.295	3.403	3.368	2.943	3.605	3.610	3.623	2.971
Majority councillors	2.128	2.286	2.342	2.043	2.329	2.351	2.447	2.174
Minority councillors	1.692	1.740	1.697	1.609	1.684	1.789	1.737	1.594
Secretary general	2.416	2.342	2.333	2.103	2.286	2.276	2.333	2.103
CEO (if separate from the Secretary)	3.385	3.189	3.270	2.906	3.316	3.184	3.297	2.879
CFO	4.313	4.291	3.962	3.557	3.975	4.090	3.821	3.471
Other managers	3.388	3.513	3.091	2.565	3.350	3.397	3.104	2.551
Local business associations	1.650	1.468	1.395	1.246	1.575	1.455	1.395	1.246
Other local associations	1.646	1.455	1.355	1.246	1.506	1.442	1.342	1.232
Citizens	1.333	1.273	1.197	1.188	1.354	1.286	1.224	1.159

Table 4 illustrates the reasons for rebudgeting. The most important causes of rebudgeting are the decisions made by higher government levels (especially decisions affecting the revenues of municipalities) and the changes in the political agenda (changes in political priorities, and desire to respond to needs/requests initially overlooked). The importance of the decisions taken by higher government levels is also confirmed by the additional comments made by respondents, many of them emphasising that allocation of external funding during the year significantly affects rebudgeting decisions. Technical reasons, such as errors when estimating expected revenues and expenditures, are considered much less important.

Table 4 Reasons for rebudgeting (min 1, max 5)

Decisions taken by higher levels of government affecting revenues	3.605
Unexpected changes in the social-economic scenario	2.525
Natural disasters	2.063
Decisions taken by higher levels of government affecting how operations are undertaken	3.050
Changes in political priorities	3.136
Need to gather consensus	2.329
Need to give out signals with a strong symbolic impact	2.468
Need to respond to needs/requests that were initially overlooked	3.173
Errors when forecasting expenditure	2.432
Errors when forecasting revenues	2.375

Finally, the impact of rebudgeting on the planning and control process (Table 5) is generally perceived as positive, because it is seen as a way of strengthening the accurateness in programming and flexibility in responding to emerging priorities. However, increasing the frequency or magnitude of changes is considered undesirable. Even the idea of changing the duration of the financial year finds no supporters, especially if the alternative is a six-month cycle. More consensus (Table 6) revolves around the perception that rebudgeting helps to strengthen the role of the executive (consisting of the mayor and the aldermen) rather than the role of the managers.

Table 5 Impact of rebudgeting on the programming and control cycle (min=1, max=5)

Rebudgeting strengthens the planning process by making it more realistic	3.520
Rebudgeting weakens the planning process by undermining the credibility of the plans initially approved	2.645
Rebudgeting strengthens the control and evaluation process because the process takes into account any needs emerging during the year	3.763
Rebudgeting weakens the control and evaluation process, as plans are reshaped to match the actual results	2.473
More frequent recourse to rebudgeting would be beneficial	2.329
Recourse to rebudgeting for larger amounts would be beneficial	2.539
The budget cycle is too long; it would be beneficial to work with six-monthly financial periods instead of annual ones	1.779
The budget cycle is too short; it would be beneficial to work with two-yearly financial periods instead of annual ones	2.390

Table 6 Impact of rebudgeting on the impact of the various actors (min=1, max=5)

	Rebudgeting strengthens the role of:
Mayor	3.521
Alderman for finance	3.541
Other aldermen	3.452
Majority councillors	2.861
Minority councillors	2.500
Secretary general	2.700
CEO (if separate from the Secretary)	2.900
CFO	3.311
Other managers	3.181
Local business associations	2.292
Other local associations	2.347
Citizens	2.278

6. Conclusions

Rebudgeting is a widespread practice in public entities across the world, though with local and organizational variations. Rebudgeting can significantly change the initial budget. Nevertheless, literature to date has

focused almost exclusively on the initial budget formulation. What's more, the scant research focusing on rebudgeting is marked (with some notable exceptions) by an exploratory-descriptive approach and by a focus on the United States. The purpose of this paper was to increase our understanding of this phenomenon by addressing three main research questions: i) what are the main reasons for rebudgeting? ii) what are the roles of the various players (politicians, managers and other stakeholders) in rebudgeting processes? iii) how does rebudgeting affect a municipality's planning and control system?

In order to investigate rebudgeting, a questionnaire was sent out to the CFOs of the 176 Italian municipalities with over 40,000 local residents.

The results confirm that budgeting and rebudgeting are strictly intertwined, not only in terms of processes (Anessi Pessina et al., 2012), but also with respect to the players.

For both budgeting and rebudgeting three are the key players: the mayor, the finance alderman and the CFO. The roles of the council and of the other managers appear much less important. This reflects the relevance of the power distribution within local governments, in terms of either political power or the "power of the purse". Moreover, contrary to conventional wisdom, there is no confirmation that managers have greater influence on decisions affecting current expenditure, whereas politicians focus on capital spending. Nor is the notion confirmed that politicians focus mainly on budgeting, leaving managers more discretion for rebudgeting. Indeed, quite the contrary emerges from the analysis. According to our respondents, in fact, politicians play a stronger role in rebudgeting. Thus, rebudgeting clearly shares the political nature usually associated with budgeting.

A common critical issue shared by all players is the impossibility to stop a rebudgeting proposal. In other words, once started, rebudgeting cannot be halted, probably because it is often a formal recognition of decisions already made or events already occurred. In this regard, decisions taken at higher levels of government are identified as particularly influential. This further confirms that, despite explicit legislative provisions to the contrary, the council is deprived of its control prerogatives. The frequent use of the reserves by the executive is yet another manifestation of this finding.

On a more positive note, rebudgeting is perceived by respondents as offering an overall favourable contribution to the municipality's planning and control system because it makes budgets more realistic and allows control systems to incorporate new needs emerging during the year.

From a theoretical point of view, our research suggests the need for further investigation of rebudgeting, which does not appear to be merely a technical tool in the hands of municipal CFOs. In particular, it would be important to analyse how municipalities use the flexibility that rebudgeting offers. If used appropriately, it gives the opportunity to review and update the municipality's goals and priorities in order to meet the changes that may have come about inside or outside the organization. However, rebudgeting needs to be well integrated within the municipality overall planning and control system. If not, should additional resources become available during the year, the risk exist that they are diverted to pursue the key players' pet projects. Similarly, should revenue fall below expectations as the year progresses, the risk exists that sacrifices fall disproportionately on innovative programmes that lack a strong sponsor. In other words, planning and control systems should incorporate programs to be activated in the presence of extra-revenues and guidelines on what expenditures to cut if needed.

In terms of policy implications, since decisions taken at higher levels of government seem to rank high among the reasons behind rebudgeting, the need arises for greater consistency in budgeting and rebudgeting timetables across levels of governments so as to reduce the uncertainty within which local entities have to make their own decisions. A greater stability in central government policies would also be of much help.

Another important policy implication is that rebudgeting should be made more transparent. At the moment, it is less visible than budgeting, also because it is "diluted" over the entire year. One possibility would be to require the council to devote one or two mid-year sessions to analysing budget adjustments in order to maintain democratic control over rebudgeting and safeguard its overall consistency with the municipality's priorities.

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