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# The strength of migration and stay aspirations: understanding harmonious, conflicting and indeterminate aspirations

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## Abstract

Studies on migration aspirations have provided fresh perspectives for two decades by focusing on the changing nature of aspirations, the aspirations-cap/abilities nexus, and by offering a counterpoint through the 'aspirations to stay'. Building from these, this article proposes a model to explain the intensity and strength of (im) mobility aspirations, given that these can be strong and specific but also weak, mild, conditional, and even conflicting. To do so, I focus on the preferences to migrate or to stay by examining how the two dimensions of (im)mobility – the intrinsic and the instrumental – interact. I study the different emotions and thoughts attached to (im)mobility, how life and migration aspirations are intertwined, and the ways in which migration and stay aspirations can co-exist. In doing so, I differentiate between three ideal-type strengths of aspirations: *harmonious*, *conflicting*, and *indeterminate aspirations*. *Harmonious aspirations* capture strong convictions about what is more convenient: staying or migrating. *Conflicting aspirations* stress that both migration and stay aspirations can be concurrently present and equally strong. *Indeterminate aspirations* represent uncertainty or indifference about where to be. With this focus, the paper provides a simple approach to orient research beyond ideal-type categories by incorporating complex, often contradictory emotions. The paper draws on 37 qualitative interviews in two former mining regions in North-West Spain to advance theorization on migration aspirations and decision-making and to question if the division between migration and stay aspirations is clear-cut.

**Keywords** Migration aspirations, Stay aspirations, Harmonious aspirations, Conflicting aspirations, Indeterminate aspirations, Instrumental migration, Intrinsic migration, Decision-making

## Introduction

Can people simultaneously aspire to migrate and to stay? This question is at the core of research on migration aspirations and decision-making, and it reflects, first, that migration and stay aspirations are not mutually exclusive (Debray et al., 2024) and, secondly, that the formation of aspirations is not always straightforward. Aspirations can be strong and specific (Esson, 2015) but also weak, vague, conditional (Schiefer, Düvell

and Sagioglu 2023), indeterminate, blurred (Carling, 2019) or ‘multi-sited’ (Boccagni, 2017). The possible strengths of one’s migration aspirations ask to further investigate their well-established definition: the conviction that migration is better than staying (Carling & Schewel, 2018). How are these convictions and their resulting migration aspirations formed? When are aspirations more likely to be nonexistent, weak or indeterminate? Can convictions that migration is best come jointly with convictions that staying is also for the best? If so, what does this mean for the analytical robustness of migration aspirations?

To answer these questions, this paper builds upon calls to measure migration and stay aspirations in a spectrum of degrees (Carling, 2012). The objective is to accommodate the multiplicity of aspirations in a simple model, to explain differences in their strength and intensity, and to reveal why both migration and stay aspirations can co-exist. For that, I examine *preferences to move and stay*. ‘Preference’ addresses the desirability of migration, regardless of feasibility or plans to actually migrate, which theoretically defines the concept of migration aspirations<sup>1</sup> (Carling, 2019). Other related concepts are however important to comprehend the aspirations to move. Carling et al. (2023) have recently examined migration aspirations along three dimensions: preference to move or stay, consideration of migration, and readiness to move. This three-dimensional approach introduces a five-fold typology of migration aspirations. Their contribution is important to capture salient distinctions in the aspirations and the determination to migrate. Yet, they assess the preference, consideration, and readiness to move as binaries. Considering that preferences to stay or migrate are not always clear-cut (Carling, 2019; Schiefer, Düvell and Sagioglu 2023), this paper adds to their contribution and proposes a model to measure the preference of and conviction about migrating or staying in a continuum of degrees. To do so, I analyze how the two dimensions of human (im) mobility – the intrinsic and the instrumental<sup>2</sup> – interact (Carling, 2012; de Haas, 2021).

Instrumentally, migration is understood as a means to an end, a strategy to realize life aspirations and improve other life dimensions by achieving better living, working, or education conditions, or by escaping violence and conflict. Occupational migration aspirations manifest the instrumentality of potential migration. Contrary to this predominantly utilitarian view, new research is increasingly studying migration’s intrinsic value, which represents a “spatially oriented nostalgia” (Carling, 2012, p. 3). These two dimensions of (im)mobility are essential for studies on decision-making given that migration aspirations arise when migration has an intrinsic *and/or* instrumental value (Carling, 2012; de Haas, 2021). However, research is yet to explore how intrinsic and instrumental rationales, separately or in combination, explain what motivates the preferences to stay or migrate and, therefore, the internal logic of aspirations. This paper fills this gap in research and applies the instrumental and intrinsic values of (im)mobility to explain degrees of migration desirability and (im)mobility preferences. In doing so, the paper embeds the study of migration aspirations into the analysis of broader life aspirations and examines how migration can be necessary to realize some life objectives, even when

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<sup>1</sup> For this reason, this paper utilizes (im)mobility ‘preferences’ and ‘aspirations’ as synonyms.

<sup>2</sup> While ‘extrinsic’ might be a better antonym of ‘intrinsic’, this notion associates migration with external uncontrolled forces. ‘Instrumental’ is a more neutral concept that grasps the utilitarian value of migration along different degrees of agency. Migration can be instrumental when escaping a life-threatening situation, but also to pursue an education.

it means sacrificing others. The myriad interactions between both dimensions of human (im)mobility open fertile research lines, including:

- How do both dimensions interact and result in (im)mobility aspirations?
- Do they always merge in the same category – migrating or staying? Instead, can multiple life ambitions and contradictory emotions result in conflicting aspirations about where to be?
- If divergences between both dimensions exist, how do they influence the formation of aspirations, decision-making and volition?

Exploring instrumental vis-à-vis intrinsic aspirations, this article proposes a non-binary approach to theorize different configurations of migration and stay preferences. I introduce the umbrella terms of harmonious, conflicting and indeterminate aspirations to capture ideal-type intensities of aspirations. *Harmonious aspirations* capture strong convictions about what is more convenient – staying or migrating – and certain migration (or staying) preferences. Conversely, *conflicting aspirations* stress that individuals can concurrently aspire to move and stay and have contradictory emotions about what is preferable. As shown below, conflicting aspirations capture the difficulty of realizing different life aspirations at the same location and represent higher or lower levels of ambivalence depending on how ‘torn’ people are between leaving or staying. Given that a lack of migration aspirations does not necessarily entail strong aspirations to stay, *indeterminate aspirations* display strong uncertainty or indifference about where to be.

Empirically, I draw on 37 semi-structured interviews in El Bierzo and Laciana, two traditionally dynamic but currently stagnant mining regions in North-West Spain. There, some reveal harmonious migration or stay aspirations, some are indifferent about where to be, and others display strong conflicting aspirations. This means that convictions that migrating is best and necessary to fulfill some life aspirations encounter equally firm beliefs that staying is also beneficial and necessary for realizing other important life objectives. How do people form (im)mobility aspirations when these are multiple and even conflicting?

### **Life and (im)mobility aspirations: the instrumental and intrinsic dimensions of migrating and staying**

#### ***The concepts***

Migration has traditionally been considered in utilitarian terms. This is well represented in traditional migration theories, such as neoclassical or historical-structuralist theories, that consider migration a response to inequalities<sup>3</sup>. Migration aspirations can also follow this logic and be predominantly occupational, educative or conflict-induced<sup>4</sup>. Staying put can also have an important instrumental value, especially if remaining contributes to other family members’ mobility or if emigrating means losing local networks. However, “migration can be valued – and yearned for – in its own right” (Carling & Schewel, 2018, p. 954), revealing its intrinsic nature. Acknowledging migration’s non-utilitarian value, including the pull of adventure or experience, captures the subjective worth people

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<sup>3</sup> Migration also reduces household uncertainty (Stark & Bloom, 1985), extending its utilitarian value beyond the individual.

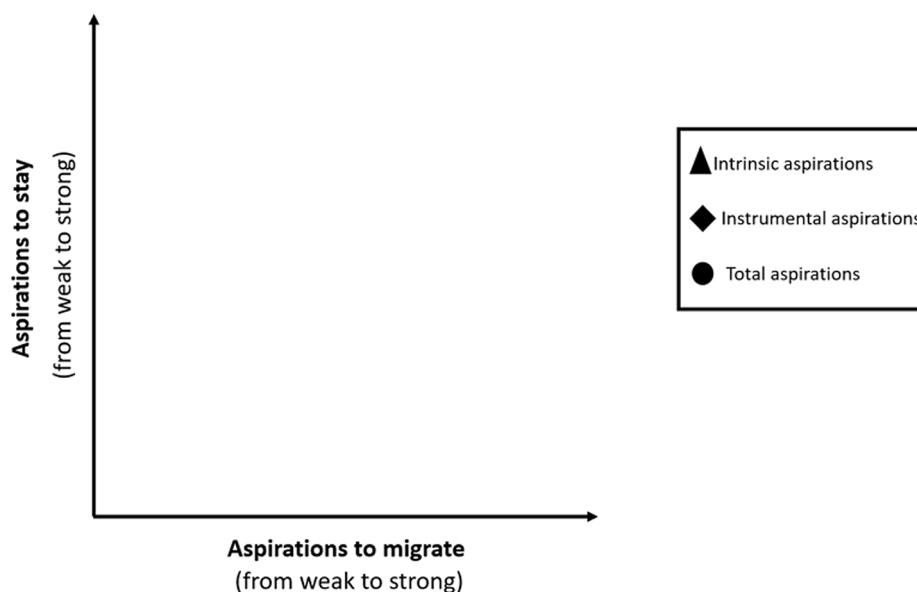
<sup>4</sup> The instrumentality of migration explains why aspirations are specially formed when there is a gap between life ambitions and local opportunities.

ascribe to mobility and how it can be treasured in itself, regardless of the end goal (Carling, 2012). For example, Berriane et al. (2013) show that migration can be a response to *who* people are, as identifying as travelers makes migration an end in itself. Moreover, the notion ‘quest migrant’ represents those who “do not primarily seek to settle in an exotic setting in order to *live better*, but to experience cultural otherness and self-detachment in order to *feel better*” (Therrien & Pellegrini, 2015, p. 610), illustrating that migration can be the experience people seek<sup>5</sup>. Staying put can also have an important intrinsic value when one yearns to remain and be close to family in the local community (Mata-Codesal, 2018).

Highlighting that migration or staying can be valuable experiences in themselves is useful to move beyond simplistic, utilitarian views of migration and to capture how wanderlust, curiosity, identity, or adventure can make migration treasured, also for those often categorized as ‘labor migrants’ (de Haas, 2021). Having said this, I acknowledge that migration’s intrinsic value can be understood from different lenses more closely related to Sen’s (1990) theorization of human freedoms. Freedoms, including those to move and to stay, have intrinsic value because they expand people’s choices and opportunities. This explains why migration is fundamental to development and why migration (or stay) capabilities are important to all, regardless of individual aspirations (de Haas, 2021).

#### Convergence, divergence, and everything in-between

The fact that migration is composed of two dimensions demands unravelling how they explain the internal logic and formation of migration aspirations. I do this in Fig. 1, gradually adding complexity to the model in its subsequent iterations (Fig. 1-7). The analysis below walks the reader through the model until the last proposed approach, which measures intensities of (im)mobility aspirations, is outlined in Fig. 6. The starting point of



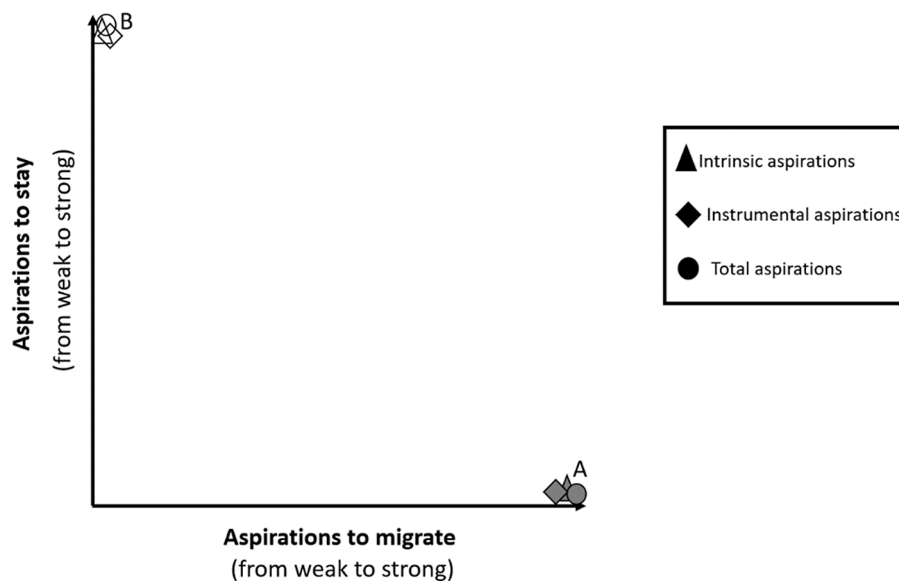
**Fig. 1** The internal logic of (im)mobility aspirations

<sup>5</sup> Some might argue that if people migrate for curiosity, migration is thus instrumental. I question this reading and vindicate both dimensions of migration.

the model is that, as others have noted before, migration aspirations arise when migration has an intrinsic *and/or* instrumental value (Carling, 2012; de Haas, 2021). This means that a combination of both values explains what motivates migration aspirations: only intrinsic rationales, only instrumental rationales, or the two combined. Throughout the analysis, I follow the model presented in Fig. 1: stay aspirations run from weak to strong in the vertical axis, and migration aspirations do so in the horizontal axis. Instead of building three different graphs to map intrinsic, instrumental, and combined aspirations, I plot them in the same figure. I use letters to refer to the aspirations of different individuals and a triangle, a diamond, or a dot to visualize, respectively, intrinsic, instrumental, and combined (total) aspirations in the figures.

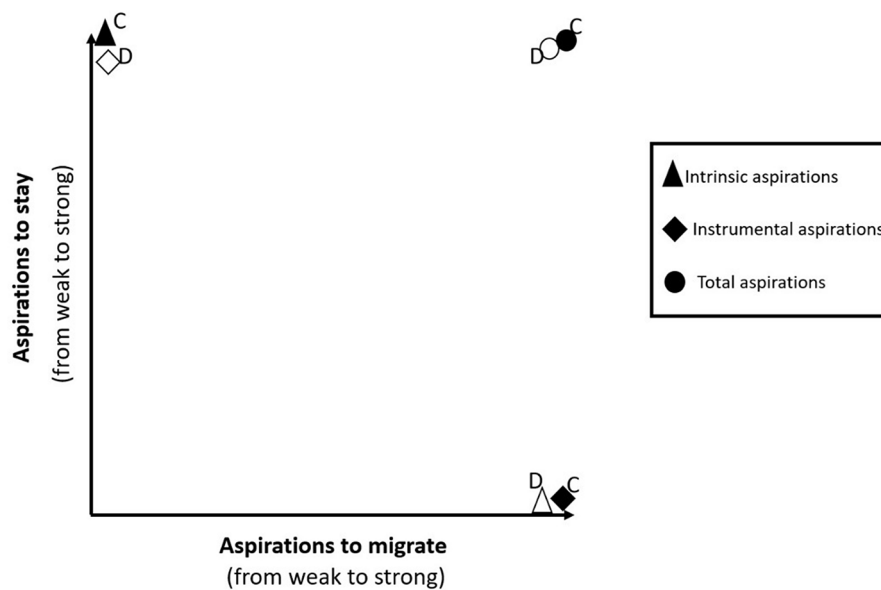
If migration has both intrinsic *and* instrumental value, each (im)mobility dimension adds to the other, resulting in *harmonious aspirations*. I define harmonious aspirations as strong, non-discordant convictions about either migrating or staying that form only when these have a utilitarian and an intrinsic value. That is, harmonious aspirations highlight individuals *only* displaying either migration or stay preferences. In Fig. 2, A indicates very strong migration aspirations given that only migration has intrinsic and instrumental value – this is, individual A attaches no value to staying. B displays the opposite.

But the intrinsic and instrumental dimensions of (im)mobility can also be at odds. The dimensions might not merge in the same category and migrating and staying can simultaneously be desirable for different reasons. For instance, strong intrinsic aspirations to stay can be accompanied by equally strong instrumental migration aspirations. Migration can be necessary to return ‘home’ in the future even when it is not preferable in itself (Mata-Codesal, 2018), and asylum seekers and IDPs are forced to migrate due to violence at ‘home’ (Bivand Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). See individual C in Fig. 3. Conversely, strong intrinsic migration aspirations can come with equally strong instrumental



**Note:** Each letter refers to the hypothetical case of one individual. Different hues are used to better illustrate the aspirations of different individuals.

**Fig. 2** Harmonious aspirations



**Note:** Each letter refers to the hypothetical case of one individual. Different hues are used to better illustrate the aspirations of different individuals.

**Fig. 3** Conflicting aspirations

stay aspirations. As shown in the analysis below, an example is Daniel, a young man who postponed his migration to the UK due to caregiving responsibilities in Ponferrada (El Bierzo), even if staying was not intrinsically valuable. Daniel could fall under the deferred migration aspirations category introduced by Carling et al. (2023), as his migration aspirations are on hold. Yet, while he presents a preference to migrate, staying is also instrumentally valuable, which calls to discern how, when, and why migration and stay aspirations coexist and affect the desirability and consideration of migration. Daniel's case is exemplified by individual D in Fig. 3. This figure introduces the notion *conflicting aspirations*, which captures contradictory emotions and thoughts surrounding migration and a divergence in the instrumental and intrinsic value given to (im)mobility.

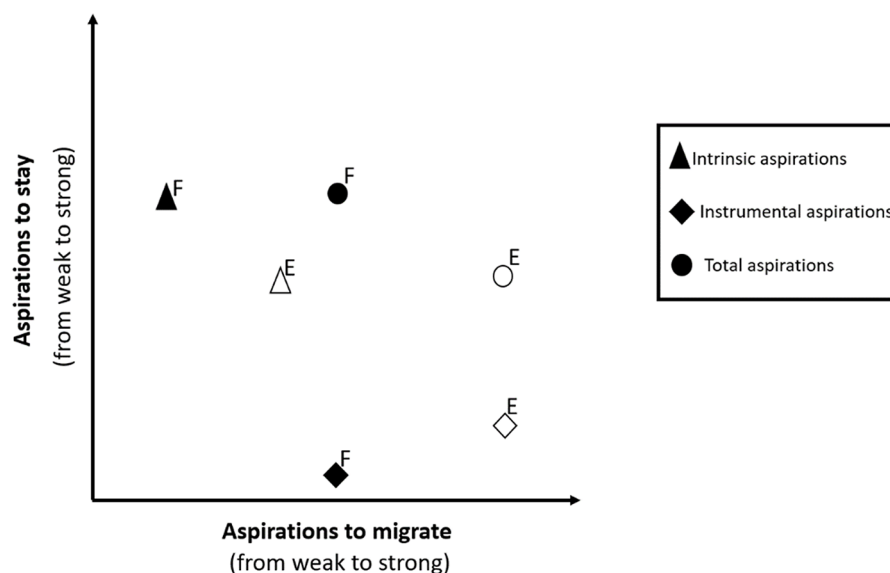
The concept is useful to explore how a coexistence of both migration and stay preferences might affect the consideration and readiness to move. While those with a clear migration preference are also more likely to seriously consider migration and be ready to migrate (Carling et al., 2023, p. 21), the fact that migration can be a pathway to realize some life aspirations (and be somewhat desirable) might explain why considerations to migrate can be present even when preferences to stay are high. This is, conflicting aspirations do not necessarily preclude migration. Despite contradictory emotions about where to be, individuals can rank their options and decide that migration is more convenient. As such, 'conflicting aspirations' provides an umbrella term to examine why migration and stay aspirations are not clear-cut, bringing research closer to social reality and to the complexity of human nature and decision-making. Incorporating conflicting aspirations to Migration Studies also adds to discussions on forced-versus-voluntary migration, showcasing how mobility can be involuntary even when aspirations to migrate are present (Bivand Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). Indeed, conflicting aspirations indicate that while some life aspirations can be realized locally, others can only be achieved through migration, detailing the variety and quality of local options available if people remain in

place. This is the case of Mateo, also analyzed below: he aspires to see El Bierzo develop, form a family there, and stay put. Concurrently, however, he only perceives a non-precarious career to be attainable through international migration, which results in instrumental migration aspirations and considerations to migrate even when intrinsically he prefers to stay.

While Fig. 3 showcases extreme departures between both dimensions of (im)mobility, these do not need to be substantial. Migration can be pursued for professional aspirations and curiosity, also when it takes us away from locations we would rather stay in (Scheibelhofer, 2018, 1007). Individuals E and F in Fig. 4 represent milder conflicting aspirations.

A separation between intrinsic and instrumental aspirations clearly generates a conflict and, therefore, blurs migration and stay aspirations. Nevertheless, in some circumstances, neither migrating nor staying have intrinsic and/or instrumental value. This is why lacking migration aspirations does not necessarily entail strong aspirations to stay. Some, like Martin, a young university student whose circumstances I present in the analysis below, are unable to decide between migrating or staying (see Carling et al., 2023, p. 23). I introduce the notion *indeterminate aspirations* to capture uncertainty and indifference about where to be. This entails that the instrumental and the intrinsic dimensions are neither skewed towards staying nor towards leaving, resulting in no migration or stay aspirations (individual G in Fig. 5).

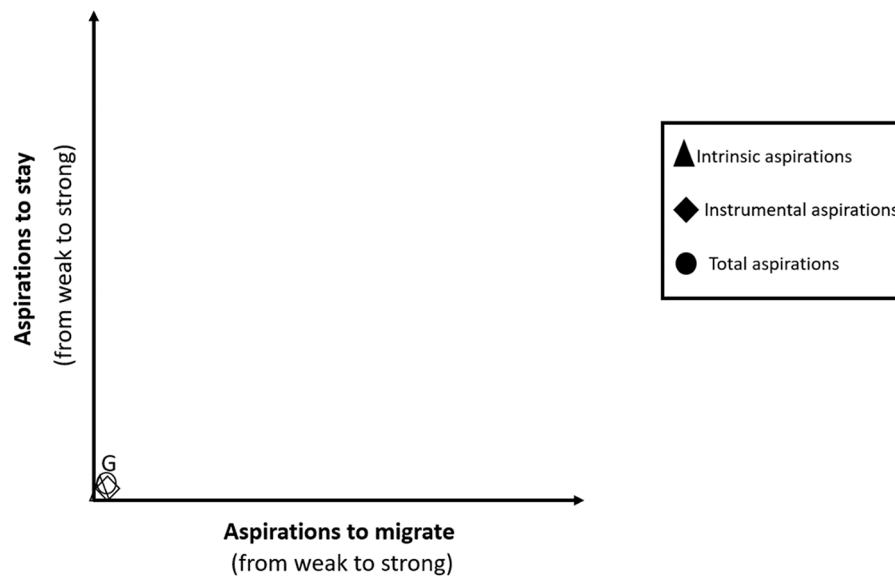
Introducing all – harmonious, conflicting, and indeterminate – aspirations in the same model makes it cumbersome. A better strategy is to artificially delineate a dividing line between harmonious aspirations, which present the strongest preference to migrate, and the rest. I do that in Fig. 6. As it should be clear from previous explanations, the model encompasses infinite combinations of instrumental/intrinsic aspirations and maps intensities of migration and stay aspirations in a spectrum. While the figure only highlights harmonious, conflicting, and indeterminate aspirations, neither should be



**Note:** Each letter refers to the hypothetical case of one individual. Different hues are used to better illustrate the aspirations of different individuals.

**Fig. 4** Milder conflicting aspirations





**Note:** The letter refers to the hypothetical case of one individual

**Fig. 5** Indeterminate aspirations

understood as monolithic. Rather, aspirations can be, for instance, extremely or somewhat harmonious. The closer one is to A or B in Fig. 6, the more harmonious aspirations will be, as they lean completely towards migrating or staying, respectively. As one departs from these extremes, migration and stay aspirations become intertwined. C represents extreme conflicting aspirations, given that both migration and stay preferences are equally strong, while E highlights mild conflicting aspirations. As shown below, conflicting aspirations do not necessarily entail a lack of migration considerations or readiness, even though these might be weaker, but they do reflect a lack of conviction about what is best – staying or migrating. In turn, the more one approaches D, the more indeterminate aspirations will be as both migration and stay aspirations are weak.

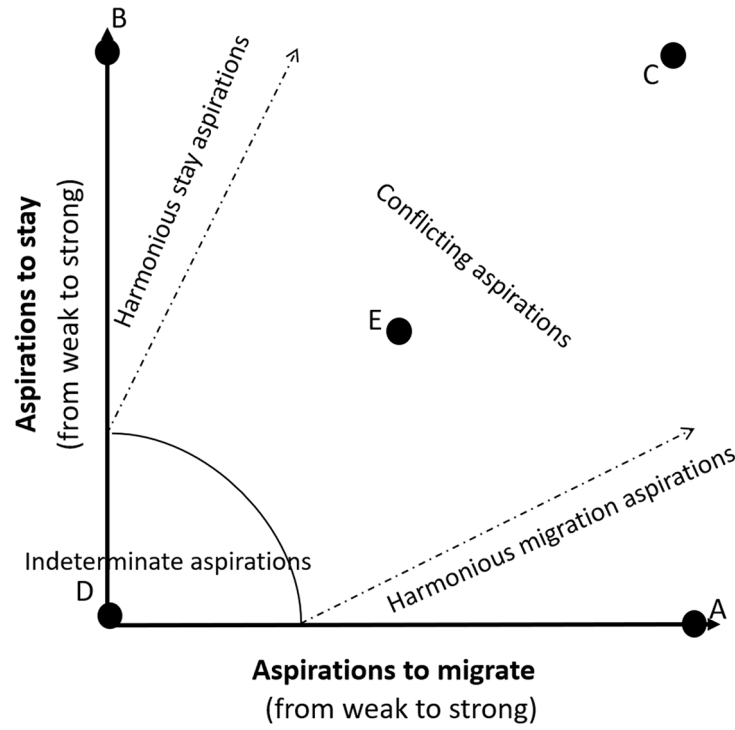
Apart from capturing the intensities of aspirations, the model also allows to map how aspirations change over time by examining whether the intrinsic and instrumental values of (im)mobility shift. In Fig. 7, H represents one individual whose aspirations changed over time from strongly leaning towards migrating ( $H_1$ ), to displaying conflicting aspirations ( $H_2$ ), to gradually developing harmonious aspirations to stay ( $H_3$ ). While this article focuses on the empirical applicability of harmonious, conflicting, and indeterminate aspirations, I also briefly touch upon changes in the instrumentality of migration (see the case of Mateo below).

After introducing the model theoretically, I demonstrate its empirical usefulness through the analysis below, in which I detail how migration aspirations are formed within the broader set of life aspirations and when can we expect (im)mobility aspirations to be strong, conditional, uncertain or contradictory, among other intensities, depending on how harmonious, conflicting or indeterminate aspirations are.

### Methodology

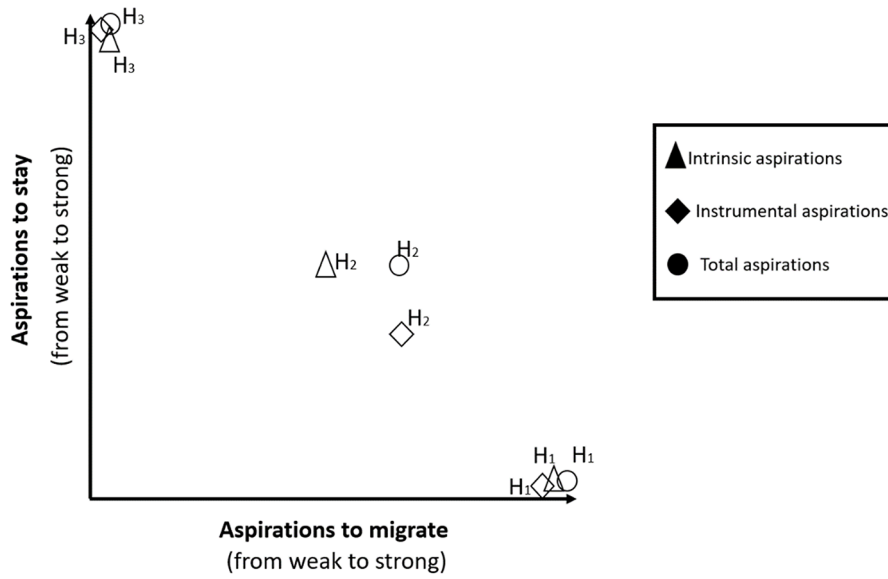
I draw on my Ph.D. fieldwork in El Bierzo and Laciana, two traditionally dynamic and immigratory but currently stagnant mining regions in North-West Spain, where I





Note: Each letter refers to the hypothetical case of one individual

**Fig. 6** Aspirations in a continuum



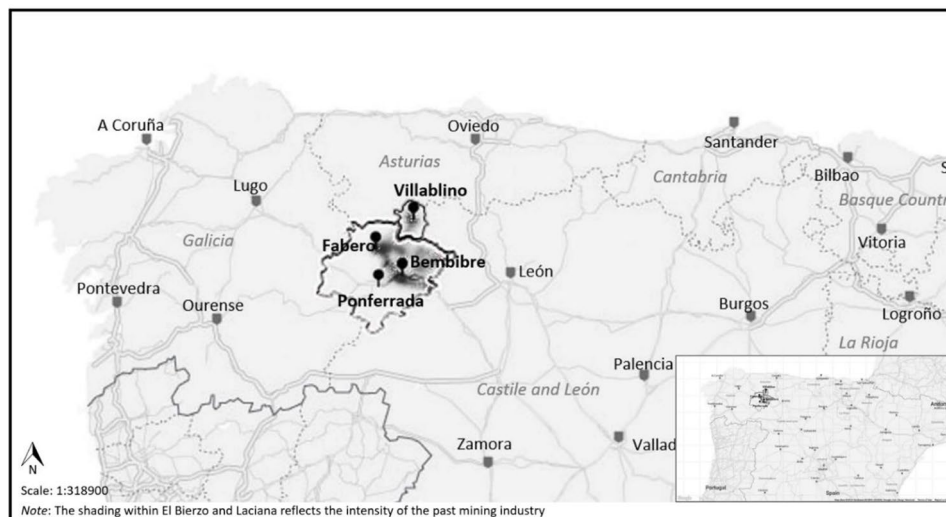
Note: Each subscript refers to the hypothetical aspirations of one individual over time

**Fig. 7** Changing aspirations over time

conducted 37 semi-structured interviews capturing the life, migration and stay aspirations of 39<sup>6</sup> aspiring migrants, non-migrants, immigrants, and returnees. The interviews were conducted in Spanish from May 2021 to February 2022 in Fabero, Ponferrada and Bembibre in the upper El Bierzo region, and Villablino in the Laciana valley<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 8). This article predominantly relies on the 23 interviewees that displayed clearly harmonious, conflicting, and indeterminate aspirations. Of these, 11 were male and 12 were female, ranging in age from 18 to 60. At the time of research, 7 interviewees aspired to either migrate internally within Spain or abroad, 6 aspired to remain in place and 10 were uncertain about what to do to varying extents. The interviewees were recruited through youth and local associations, such as Amilcar Cabral, and through snowballing sampling. Beyond the interviews, I attended local demonstrations and roundtables on the regions' future, which allowed me to observe the overall perception of local opportunities and to conduct around fifty informal conversations. These matched the interview findings, assuring that while some have harmonious aspirations, others are not convinced about what to do as both migrating and staying are good for different reasons. While this article mainly relies on 23 interviews, the informal conversations, 9 months of observations, and the remaining 14 interviews also contributed to the development of the proposed approach. All the names are pseudonyms.

### The research setting

El Bierzo<sup>8</sup> and Laciana are two neighboring mining basins in the Leon province (Northwest Spain) that, for around 70 years, were a source of opportunities. Nonetheless, the mining industry collapsed in the early 2000s<sup>9</sup>, a process accompanied by persistent socio-economic crises, high dependency on pensioners (Vega Núñez and Calvo



**Fig. 8** The field site

<sup>6</sup> I interviewed two individuals together twice.

<sup>7</sup> These were traditionally the most dynamic and populous municipalities. Although not a mining city, Ponferrada provided the necessary services to run the mines. Currently most activities are concentrated there.

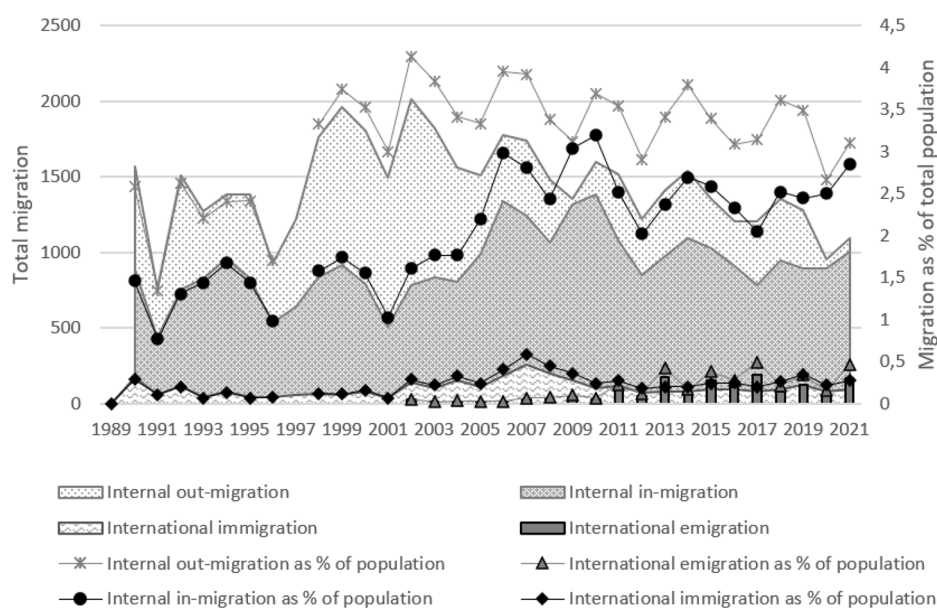
<sup>8</sup> When researching the mining industry, we can differentiate between the upper and lower Bierzo. The latter has been based on small-scale agriculture, while the former's economy was mining-based. While I focus on the aspirations in the upper Bierzo, occasionally, I refer to my case study as El Bierzo not only for simplification purposes, but also because the regional fabric was based on coal mining.

<sup>9</sup> See Council Decision 2010/787/EU for the closure plans.

González 2020), and a general nostalgia for the dynamic past. Despite governmental aid<sup>10</sup>, the rapid mine closures have not been followed by economic alternatives, resulting in waning opportunities. Leo, a 41-year-old self-employed worker with stay aspirations, mentioned: “An area with 90% of its income coming from a single sector like mining, which has gone bankrupt [...] They closed the mines and abandoned us”.

From 2019 there have been two alternatives: to either close the industries or to continue mining after returning the subsidies received (CESCYL, 2012). The last local mine remained open until 2018. This meant that 58.22% of the direct workforce was reduced in ten years, resulting in a greater loss, as, still in 2006, every 100 direct jobs created in the mining sector generated 187.3 new jobs (Cortijo Álvarez, 2012, p. 277). Consequently, the stay capabilities of many – particularly in smaller, more rural municipalities<sup>11</sup> – have been negatively affected, and internal and international out-migrations are growing. While in 1991, 1.35% of the total population emigrated internally, 4.13% of the population did so in 2002, a 205.93% increase in a decade. International emigration, lower in number, peaked at 190 departures in 2017 (around 0.50% of the total population), a 794.32% increase since 2002, when 0.06% of the population emigrated (Fig. 9).

Despite this growth, out-migration remains relatively low in volume, and Ponferrada and Leon (the provincial capital) are the top destinations (JcYL, 2022). This is despite low labor participation rates and wages, and high temporality in the province (INE, 2022). Out-migrants’ geographical concentration already highlights differences between municipalities, particularly those between Ponferrada – the county town of El Bierzo – and the dynamic town of Bembibre, on the one hand, and the more stagnant (and worse connected) medium-sized towns of Fabero or Villablino and more rural, isolated



**Fig. 9** Migrations from and to El Bierzo and Laciana, 1989–2021. *Source* Own elaboration based on JcYL (2022)

<sup>10</sup> EU and national aid maintained a steady decrease throughout the 2000s. See ECSC’s decision 3632/93 and Council Regulations (EC) No. 1407/2002 and No. 2010/787/EU.

<sup>11</sup> Most upper Bierzo municipalities have around 2,000 inhabitants with scarce activities and services. While, overall, they are about 30 min by car from Ponferrada, the roads of smaller and more remote municipalities (e.g., Toreno, Fabero) are not well-kept, hindering commuting especially in winter.

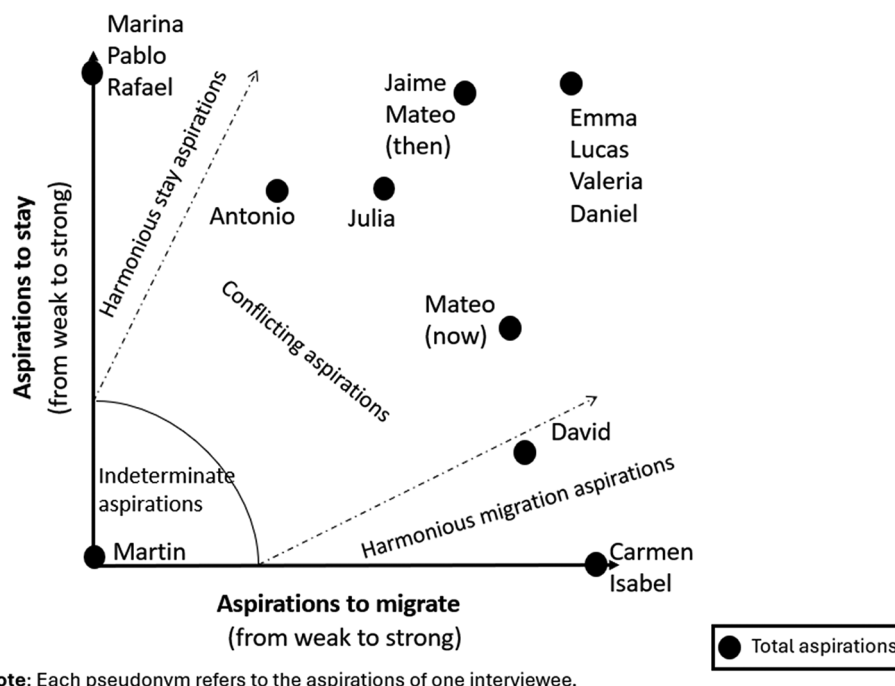
villages, such as Berlanga del Bierzo, on the other<sup>12</sup>. Ponferrada – and to a lesser extent Bembibre – concentrate most activities and offer greater opportunities, mostly in the public and hospitality sectors, so commuting for work, study, and overall life-making is common.

Nonetheless, the future is overwhelmingly regarded with despair for two reasons. First, there is a general perception that the restructuring funds were misused and invested in unpractical initiatives, including industrial parks without good road accesses, rather than in the establishment of alternative industries. Secondly, at the time of research there was only one major company in the region – LM Wind Power, a rotor blade supplier for wind turbines –, which had already resorted to redundancy plans. Valeria, a 41-year-old English teacher with migration aspirations but pressing family responsibilities, said: “We’re not living, we’re surviving [...] as we can [...] Either they give us a little light or we can’t see [a future]”.

The negative socio-economic outlook comes with strong land attachment and nostalgia for the recent lively past. Moreover, some also perceived that a decision to either stay or migrate will unequivocally mean sacrificing some life aspirations in benefit of others. Under such circumstances, how do people ponder the benefits of migrating and staying?

### Beyond migration and stay aspirations

This section presents the harmonious, conflicting, and indeterminate aspirations of 23 individuals in El Bierzo and Laciana (see Fig. 10 for some interviewees’ aspirations in the proposed model). I first introduce how *harmonious aspirations* are formed and how they can be very strong and specific but also less certain. Then I demonstrate that aspirations



**Fig. 10** Interviewees’ aspirations in a continuum. *Note* Each pseudonym refers to the aspirations of one interviewee

<sup>12</sup> There are also important differences in population size: Ponferrada has 64,000 inhabitants, Bembibre and Villablino 8,500, and Fabero 4,400. The remaining municipalities have, on average, 1,400 inhabitants with over 5 municipalities below 1,200.

can also be *conflicting*, especially when the instrumental and intrinsic value of migrating (or staying) are at odds and when different life aspirations cannot be realized in the same location. I showcase very strong as well as milder conflicting aspirations. With this focus, I analyze the well-being, emotions and overall decision-making of those at or near the extremes of migration and stay aspirations, and of those with ambivalent aspirations, too. I also briefly discuss the applicability of *indeterminate aspirations*.

### Harmonious migration aspirations

The sorrow over a booming past that ended 20 years ago was vivid among older interviewees who remembered the dynamism of El Bierzo and Laciana. However, just like in other studies, age was a defining factor of strong migration aspirations (Aslany et al., 2021). Mainly younger interviewees presented both strong instrumental and intrinsic aspirations to migrate and, consequently, *harmonious migration aspirations*. This was particularly the case for those in their 20s and early 30s, who did not recall the dynamic past and had experienced the sharp developmental decline. Their migration aspirations were boosted by limited regional opportunities, a strong discontent with the cultural and political landscape, and by the realization that their happiness and self-achievement lay elsewhere. This occurred regardless of their home municipality, as even Ponferrada was associated with precarity, scarce opportunities, and difficulties for good life-making. The cases of Carmen, Isabel, and David, who were in their 20s at the time of research, exemplify this (Fig. 10).

Carmen moved from Madrid to Ponferrada as a child when her father was relocated and has remained in the city ever since. She had aspired to migrate internally within Spain at least for the last 3 years. Together with her husband, Marcos, they first planned to migrate to Madrid. High living costs and an inability to save led to the alternative, more realistic aspirations to migrate to A Coruña, a nearby city where they had family. Carmen's migration aspirations were motivated by the economic uncertainty, precarity and job temporariness she had experienced for the last seven years, after she started working at the age of 16, and were tied to the perception she could not fulfill her life aspirations in Ponferrada. These included achieving professional security and self-growth, which Carmen tied to discovering other places and experiencing adventures:

*“We don't live well. We can't afford to have the heating on or buy fresh produce. Going on holiday, to the movies, to theaters isn't feasible. I want to be carefree. Experience life [...] My friends, my family are here, but [...] I'm not happy”*

At the time of interview, Carmen had a precarious, part-time job, and Marcos was unemployed, which made it hard to make ends meet and have a fulfilling life. The impossibility of realizing key professional and familial life aspirations were the driving forces of their migration aspirations. Other interviewees also regarded migration as the best alternative to pursue their life objectives. Isabel, a recent high school graduate with no previous migratory experience, saw migration as an opportunity to pursue her educational and independence aspirations: she was preparing to move to Salamanca, a nearby university town, to study a BA in Economics – a degree not offered in Ponferrada. She was excited to break free, grow as a person and know other places in Spain as she had not travelled much.

For some, like Carmen and Isabel, migration is a pathway to fulfill major life objectives and has both instrumental and intrinsic value: migration is not only a strategy to realize key life aspirations – especially when the capabilities to stay and have a ‘good life’ are limited –, but it is also linked to personal growth, adventure, and wanderlust. The merging of instrumental and intrinsic aspirations in the same category triggers clear migration preferences and, therefore, harmonious migration aspirations. Yet, migration can be regarded as the best option even when it means prioritizing pressing objectives over other life domains. This is the case of David.

When we met, he was in his mid-20s, worked for his family’s tax counseling firm and had a relatively easy life. In his late teens, he became involved in neighborhood associations and participated in local demonstrations with the intention of shaping local change. His aspirations to remain and boost local development clashed with those for adventure and curiosity for places abroad. He mentioned that, over time, he became increasingly convinced that migration was best, even if it meant a less active participation in local organizations: “Politically, economically, it goes from bad to worse [...] I don’t want to feel part of this decadence [...] I want to go, see something new, see what it’s like”. At the time of interview, David had specific aspirations to move to Czechia to further his studies and find work. Migration, although instrumental to achieve financial success, was also intrinsic to satiate curiosity to “know life abroad” and to get away from feeling responsible for local development. David’s migration aspirations, however, showcase that strong convictions about migration being best can be accompanied by the deferral of important life objectives and that, over time, weak migration aspirations can morph into strong harmonious aspirations to move, reflecting the transient nature of aspirations.

Despite strong migration aspirations, some did not have enough capabilities to migrate, like Carmen:

*“Having such desire to leave and being stuck here [...] I want to leave now, and I can’t. I’m holding on here. Holding on to a job that doesn’t give me enough money [...] I need to check every penny, see how the money comes to see if I can finally [...] leave”.*

While research mostly focuses on limited capabilities and involuntary immobility in the so-called ‘Global South’ (see Aslany et al., 2021, 12–14), they can also be present in high-income countries, particularly among specific social groups and in ailing regions with limited opportunities for good life-making. Unfortunately, studies on emigration from high-income countries remain scarce (Scheibelhofer, 2018), which deepens a divide in migration studies between investigations on immigration dynamics to the ‘Global North’ and emigration patterns from the ‘Global South’.

### **Harmonious stay aspirations**

While for some a ‘good life’ is not achievable in place, others clearly prefer to stay despite the financial gains migration could provide. Voluntary immobility in depressed scenarios like El Bierzo and Laciana is often seen as irrational due to the economic bias underpinning much of migration research (Clark & Lisowski, 2017). Yet, scholars have recently shown that staying can also be an active decision bringing wellbeing and happiness even in stagnant regions (Vezzoli, 2023). This reflects the importance of different conceptions



of the 'good life' that treasure non-financial life aspects – such as being close to family, friends and nature, and the tranquility and security that many associate with 'home' – over high-paying careers or dynamic environments. The strong stay aspirations of Marina, Pablo and Rafael illustrate this.

When we met, Marina was in her early-20s and had no migration experience apart from a brief 6-month educational exchange in France. During our encounter, she displayed strong place attachment and no intention to leave El Bierzo as her previous migration

*“boosted my love for my home. Many people leave and it's an eye-opening experience. For me, it was too. I realized how great it is here [...] It opened my eyes to my home even more.”*

Yearning to be 'home' results in strong intrinsic stay aspirations and can come with the conviction that a 'good life' can be achieved locally despite the stagnant economy. For younger interviewees, like Marina or Pablo, this meant expanding their education through online universities, like UNED or UNIR, finding a job locally, often in the public sector, and being willing to commute daily to Leon<sup>13</sup>. For instance, Pablo, who was also in his 20s and had no migration experience nor aspirations to leave, reflected similar life aspirations as Marina, which included cultivating their local relationships and involvement in their communities. The sense of security and community they experienced in El Bierzo explained their aspirations to stay and find ways to locally fulfill their life aspirations. Pablo mentioned:

*“I want to stay here. Regardless of how much or little I earn. I'll do my BA at UNED, prepare for a civic exam [...] Leon is 1,5 h from here (Fabero), I can always commute. Part of the salary will go on gas. But I can make it here and I'll be happy. In peace.”*

For some, stay aspirations were also accompanied by growing discontent and complemented by desires to see the regions develop. This was particularly the case when interviewees felt endowed<sup>14</sup> and responsible for their home. Rafael is a case in point. A 70-year-old man who migrated to Portugal in his youth for professional reasons and then returned to Fabero to become a mine owner. He benefited from early retirement aged 50 and his life aspirations since then have revolved around shaping local change:

*“God put me on Earth with an obligation. Made me a businessman [...] I must create jobs, do things. In 2004 [when he retired], had I put the money in my pocket I could have lived very well, but I decided that I had to create, that I had to help, and I got into [golf]<sup>15</sup>. Then, the famous 2008 crisis came by and everything went south.”*

While stay aspirations in decaying places are perceived as a synonym of failure and low ambition (Clark & Lisowski, 2017), especially in young individuals like Pablo and Marina, place attachment, local networks, and aspirations to shape change are strong rationales encouraging voluntary immobility. This contradicts the neoliberal logic that

<sup>13</sup> Leon is 118 km away from Ponferrada, 126 km from Fabero, 95 km from Bembibre and 102 km from Villablino.

<sup>14</sup> Relative endowment offers a counterpoint to relative deprivation and refers to the well-being experienced relative to a reference group (Vezzoli, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> While his attempt to start an alternative business in El Bierzo failed, he was, at the time of research, managing one of his son's sport shops in Ponferrada.



associates the 'good life' with financial prosperity and socio-economic mobility and reminds us that the 'good life' is linked to what people value. Therefore, economic crises do not automatically result in large migrations. Subjective interpretations of social change and future possibilities capture how people behave, and distinct life priorities and values can encourage stay aspirations, even in lethargic areas. This is particularly when individuals value non-financial aspects of life, including family, friends or the environment over capital accumulation (Vezzoli, 2023), and when they are willing and/or able to fulfill major life aspirations in place. In these cases, staying has both instrumental and intrinsic value, resulting in harmonious stay aspirations (Fig. 10). But how to decide what is best when different aspects of life are at odds?

### **Between the hammer and the anvil: conflicting aspirations**

The next two subsections examine how perceptions about *where* main life objectives can be pursued and achieved shape the formation of migration and stay aspirations. The focus is on individuals whose main life objectives cannot be achieved in the same location, which results in conflicting emotions and preferences about migrating. Drawing on the intrinsic and instrumental dimensions of (im)mobility, I first explore the circumstances of those with strong instrumental migration and intrinsic stay aspirations, and then those with strong instrumental stay and intrinsic migration aspirations. These subsections explore different degrees of conflicting aspirations.

### **Stay for love, leave for stability**

Research on life aspirations and well-being have shown that life goals are shaped, among others, by values (Bespalov et al., 2017) and personality traits (Roberts & Robins, 2012), which means that differences on what people want to achieve in life are expected. While my interviewees were at different life stages, had distinct life responsibilities and heterogeneous past experiences, many mentioned relatively similar objectives, including aspirations for personal and professional growth, financial stability, maintaining local relationships, and belonging. While these broad goals had a different meaning and importance across interviewees<sup>16</sup>, one similarity among many youngsters was the perception that they could not pursue all their major life objectives in the same location. The aspirations for professional development and financial stability, and aspirations to continue cultivating their local relationships were particularly conflicting.

Due to the increasing instability and poor local opportunities, many interviewees, especially those at the beginning of their career, perceived that they did not have a future in place. This boosted aspirations to migrate and develop professionally elsewhere. Concurrently, however, a deep place attachment, strong community affinity and the presence of local networks resulted in strong aspirations to remain and pursue non-financial life goals. The inability to pursue major life objectives in a single place resulted in contradictory convictions about whether staying or leaving was more convenient, immersing some individuals, like Mateo, Jaime, Emma, or Lucas, in an uncertain and conflicting decision-making process (Fig. 10) where they pondered stay and migration aspirations, as well as their capability to stay. For instance, Mateo, a young adult with an educational

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<sup>16</sup> For example, the threshold of what constitutes financial stability differed across participants and so did what 'belonging' means. For some, being an active member of the local community was relevant; for others, 'belonging' was associated to simply feeling welcome.

background in mechatronics, associated the region with inner peace and happiness. Yet, the realization he could not have a meaningful livelihood locally<sup>17</sup> triggered conflicting emotions about where to be:

*“It’s either live here however or go abroad to make the life you want [...] The only way to survive economically is to go abroad, even if you don’t want to [...] What I want is to be home, with my people, my family, in my area. In this place which is mine [...] One thing is what we’d like, another thing is what there is. How can I choose?”*

Valeria, whose case is presented in the sub-section below, confirmed that her brother, Jaime, who had never migrated, nor had he ever expressed aspirations to migrate, was in a similar situation:

*“He wanted and still wants to stay [...] Here he has a job, but it’s not good: poorly-paid, long hours... He’s now saying: ‘If I find a good job nearby, I’m leaving’ [...] I never heard that from my brother before [...] He prefers to stay here, at home. But people get tired [...] I’ve never seen him like this [...] Not knowing what to do. Unhappy. Stuck”*

While Jaime, who was in his early 40s, refused to be interviewed, he was happy to have informal, unrecorded conversations, and allowed me to observe his interactions with Valeria and his parents. During our encounters, he corroborated he felt ‘paralyzed’ and ‘between two stools’, unhappy in El Bierzo but not convinced internal migration was a better option. A strong place attachment fueled his aspirations to stay. However, he wanted a professional promotion, non-minimum-wage work, and better living standards, which he perceived unattainable locally. Commuting to Leon for work to remain in El Bierzo was an option he considered, although, despite his efforts, he had failed to secure any job interviews there. In this context, uncertainty, insecurity and in-betweenness were notions that he mentioned repeatedly. These were emotions shared by other participants, including Emma or Lucas. Emma was in her mid-20s, had always lived in Ponferrada and only considered migration when her temporary contract was not extended in the fall of 2021. Yet, migration considerations clashed with a clear understanding that migration was not ideal. While a sound option professionally, Lucas summarized well the contradicting emotions he and Emma shared:

*“Professionally [...] I don’t see a future here. [...] But I’d like to stay. I’d love this to be the place where I could come back to rest. It’d give me much peace of mind [...] I’m hesitant because I’m not convinced about what’s best and I don’t know how to get out of this situation”*

The life circumstances exemplified by Lucas, Jaime, Emma, and Mateo show the difficulty of choosing where to be when both migrating and staying are preferable to pursue different life objectives. They stress how migration can be desirable and a potential course of action to gain a livelihood, even when preferences to stay are strong and intrinsically linked to direct wellbeing. Moreover, they showcase how coexisting migration and stay preferences can be understood by limited capabilities to stay. This calls to further research the interrelation between aspirations and capabilities, and to further

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<sup>17</sup> At the time of research, commuting to Leon was not an option: despite a 6-month job search, he had gotten no interviews.

theorize the latter. What does having capabilities to stay mean? How does lacking them affect aspiration formation, decision-making, and the perceived (in)voluntariness of migrating? This is especially important because those with conflicting aspirations were postponing decision-making, which translated to less mobility, life satisfaction and well-being. In one of our conversations, Jaime mentioned: “My decision is not mine anymore” which resembles Lucas’s observation: “If I leave, I am not leaving. They are pushing me out”. Similarly, Mateo was looking forward to leaving behind student life to enter the labor market but simultaneously wished for his vocational training course not to end so he could postpone decision-making:

*“I can’t make a decision. I must. But I can’t. I’ll have to go. I know. It’s too much [...] I feel defeated. And sad. But also hopeful, in a way [...] It’s a good enough plan, you know? A plan B. The best for me would be to stay here. With a job, obviously. But that would be an ideal, rosy world”.*

It is important to note that aspirations, including conflicting aspirations, are not fixed convictions but, rather, change over time. Mateo contacted me recently to share that he got a good job opportunity in Poznań (Poland) through a friend, and he was preparing to go. While he predominantly called to know more about my experience as a migrant, he also shared that he now considers temporary migration necessary to build a career and return to El Bierzo in the future. Despite his enthusiasm to finally work as a mechatronic, migration was still not intrinsically desirable: “I still want to stay but I cannot let life pass me by”. While still conflicting, his current preferences, migration considerations and preparation plans indicate a shift in mentality, resulting in more harmonious migration aspirations and, hence, weaker conflicting aspirations (Fig. 10). Considerations to migrate can therefore be present even when migration preferences coexist with strong preferences to stay (see Carling et al., 2023).

#### **At odds with family responsibilities**

Other than local opportunities and constraints, life and migration aspirations are also shaped by group dynamics. Aspiring migrants can be subjected to family obligations (Fleischer, 2007) and individual convictions about where to live a ‘good life’ can be overridden by familial needs about where members should live, indicating the importance of differentiating between individual and collective migration aspirations (Rodriguez-Pena, 2023). The life circumstances of Antonio, Julia, Valeria, and Daniel showcase the relational aspect of migration and how individual intrinsic migration aspirations are sometimes put on hold for the family’s sake. Take Antonio as an example. He emigrated from Fabero in his early 20s out of curiosity to discover new places and to secure a job as a high-school teacher in Asturias (Spain). While happy and with no intention to return, he did so in his 50s: “I would’ve preferred not coming back [...] I didn’t want to, but [...] I’m an only child, and I was going to take care of [parents]”.

A clash between individual preferences and family responsibilities also triggered the spatial immobility of Julia, a dental prosthetist in her late 50s with no migration experience but strong aspirations to wander and experience living abroad. Julia took over the family business and finances as a young adult, which prevented her from emigrating:

*J: I'd have loved to leave because I have itchy feet, not because I didn't have a future here [...] There was always work back then [...] But my idea was always to go abroad [...] It was my lifelong dream.*

*N: What kept you here?*

*J: Family. The family business. I felt totally obliged to work in it [...] I'm too rooted in my family and all that, so I couldn't say no. Or I didn't know how to say no [...] But I'd have loved [to migrate]."*

Both Antonio and Julia alluded to past decision-making, where they experienced conflicting aspirations but decided to return 'home' or remain in place due to familial obligations. They expressed how their life satisfaction was negatively affected by such a decision, yet staying was not an inactive process for them but a conscious, even if constrained, choice. Similarly, Valeria (Jaime's sister) and Daniel, who voiced strong aspirations to leave El Bierzo, stayed to tend to caregiving responsibilities. The need to stay and take care of their family arose, however, less than a year before we met, which resulted in emotions running high during our encounters. When I met Valeria in the fall of 2021, she was an English teacher in her early 40s with an extensive migration history: In her early 20s, she first emigrated to Barcelona, then moved to Australia, and finally settled in Madrid. She returned to Ponferrada before COVID-19. Although returning was not appealing, her father was diagnosed with advanced cancer, and she became the primary caregiver thanks to her flexible working hours. She could not leave because:

*"My father has pancreatic cancer so right now I can't leave. He has few days left to live. As soon as it happens... whatever happens, whatever must happen, I'll feel more liberated in the sense that I won't have to be here [...] Now I'm looking after him and doing what I must for him and my family [...] [Before returning] I thought about moving to Ireland. To travel, discover a different place. I needed to go because my blood was burning [...] That's who I am. I'd like to leave, be somewhere else [...] but I might need to stay here dying of disgust."*

Daniel's case is similar. Originally from Pakistan, he emigrated to Spain when he was 5 years old. His father died in 2020 and he became the manager of a relatively successful fruit shop in Ponferrada and the provider for his mother and five younger siblings. His new responsibilities meant, at least temporarily, postponing his aspirations and plans to migrate to the UK, where he had family:

*"I was about to leave in late 2019, but my father got very sick, so I delayed the trip. Then, the pandemic happened, my father passed away and, suddenly, I was in charge of everything and everyone. I can't leave now [...] I can't plan as I wish anymore. I need to take care of the shop, provide for my mother and sisters [...] Maybe when they get married, I'll be able to go. Not now."*

Antonio, Julia, Valeria, and Daniel exemplify how a role as caretaker can confront individual aspirations with responsibilities towards the kin, postponing migration, the discovery of new places and the pursuit of life aspirations associated with personal growth, identity, and adventure (Fig. 10). This shows the importance of exploring the relational aspect of (im)mobility aspirations to investigate whether individuals migrate or remain for their or the family's benefit. The clash between the interviewees' intrinsic migration aspirations and the instrumental need to stay and take care of the family negatively

affected their well-being and agency. Still, they emphasized that, although constrained, remaining was a relatively active choice and reflected an instrumental preference to stay and care for their family. Valeria mentioned:

*“My father isn’t keeping me here himself. He tells me to go back to Madrid or to leave for Ireland because he knows that’s what I want [...] So, yes, it’s my decision but at the same time I feel I don’t have a choice. If I leave, I’ll feel terrible, guilty. I can’t.”*

Antonio confirmed:

*“I could have put my parents in a nursing home [...] but I felt guilty [...] They didn’t make me [return], but I felt it wasn’t about me anymore. My life was out of my control somehow [...] And after a while, I came to terms with being here. Not 100% happy, but... satisfied, I guess.”*

In addition to feeling guilty and responsible, another common sentiment for younger respondents, like Daniel and Valeria, was hope. Depending on how their personal situations unravel, they were hopeful they would regain control of their lives and potentially fulfill their migration aspirations. In the case of Antonio and Julia, while they still had migration aspirations, these had decreased over time as their family responsibilities grew and they developed strategies to find content locally. Among others, these strategies included reminiscing about past holidays abroad. While exploring their strategies goes beyond the scope of this paper, these mechanisms remain vital to comprehend how Antonio and Julia have found ways to live a ‘good life’ in place, resulting in more dormant, less conflicting migration aspirations.

All interviewees presented in this section displayed deferred migration aspirations (Carling et al., 2023). Yet, rather than a consequence of timing or previous commitment, their migration aspirations were on hold due to coexisting preferences to stay and to migrate, which resulted in lower readiness to move.

### **Indeterminate aspirations**

In this brief section, I return to the simple definition of migration aspirations: “a conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration” (Carling & Schewel, 2018, p. 946) to ask: If people express strong indifference or are unable to articulate where they want to be, how do we categorize them? Can we claim that they do not have migration aspirations but clearly possess aspirations to stay? I came across these questions after interviewing Martin, a student in his early 20s, who expressed little enthusiasm both about staying in Ponferrada and going elsewhere:

*“I often think about what I’ll do after school, where I’d like to be, but I simply don’t know. Staying is comforting but isn’t enough [...] I wouldn’t say I’m happy here or that I’d like to stay. But I don’t know if I want to leave either [...] So many people have left but I don’t know if I could do it. Sometimes I feel I’m waiting for a sign about what to do. I don’t know what to tell you.”*

While Martin did not have migration aspirations, it would be dishonest to say that he had stay aspirations. He did not express clear thoughts about either migrating or staying, and remaining seemed to be partially a consequence of social inertia. While one interviewee is clearly too small a sample and insufficient to make any conclusions,

Martin's situation is indicative of the need for yet another category of aspirations that encapsulates individuals expressing an 'I don't know' answer to questionnaires and interviews on migration aspirations and decision-making. Carling et al. (2023) have already argued that 'I don't know' might be a substantive answer for those unable to take a stand between migrating or staying, which does not necessarily have to reflect conflicting feelings and thoughts but rather that neither migration nor stay aspirations are present (Fig. 10). Hence my proposal of *indeterminate aspirations*.

### Concluding discussion

This paper proposes an approach to conceptualize aspirations in a spectrum of degrees and account for the various intensities and configurations of aspirations. It does so by analyzing how the two dimensions of (im)mobility – the instrumental and the intrinsic – interact, explaining when migration has intrinsic, instrumental, or both values. I argue that instrumental/intrinsic aspirations explain the internal logic of the formation of migration and stay aspirations and indicate when aspirations are harmonious, conflicting, or indeterminate. While *harmonious aspirations* capture strong, non-discordant convictions and clear preferences about either migration or staying, *conflicting aspirations* stress that both migration and stay aspirations can be concurrently present and equally strong, and *indeterminate aspirations* illustrate indifference about where to be. The harmonious, conflicting, or indeterminate nature of one's aspirations determines the intensity and strength of migration and stay preferences. The proposed approach embeds the study of migration aspirations more comprehensively into the analysis of broader life aspirations, examining how (im)mobility aspirations are formed when not all life aspirations are pursuable in the same location. This is important for three reasons: (1) to accommodate all intensities of aspirations in a non-dichotomous model, (2) to theorize (in)voluntariness in a continuum, and (3) to analyze the relational aspects of (im)mobility aspirations.

First, survey questionnaires tend to measure aspirations in yes/no questions (Carling & Schewel, 2018), simplifying choices for participants. Nevertheless, aspirations are complex phenomena and, generally, only individuals with firm convictions at or near the extremes of migrating or staying give predictable answers. Among my interviewees only those with harmonious aspirations presented established convictions. Conversely, the answers of those with conflicting aspirations depended on the context, the formulation of the questions, and the degree to which I delved into their life aspirations and migratory convictions. Conditional, conflicting and indeterminate aspirations cannot be measured with yes/no questions. As such, models examining the "different strengths and dimensions of migration aspirations" (Carling & Schewel, 2018, p. 950) are needed, which this article provides. Qualitative methods, especially life interviews, are useful in researching harmonious, conflicting, and indeterminate aspirations, capturing (im) mobility aspirations along a spectrum and analyzing how these change over time. Yet, questionnaires can also map differences in the nature of aspirations by covering simultaneously life aspirations and migration and stay preferences.

Secondly, the article provides a framework to partially unpack the voluntariness of (im)mobility<sup>18</sup>. It facilitates exploring whether (im)mobility is voluntary to the same

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<sup>18</sup> Migration and stay capabilities also shape (in)voluntariness. This is demonstrated through the narratives of Mateo, Lucas, Emma or Jaime, whose conflicting aspirations are shaped by limited capabilities to stay and develop the self.

extent when aspirations are conflicting rather than harmonious. When the instrumental and intrinsic dimensions clash, migration might not be a liberating experience but, instead, a result of low capabilities to stay or a consequence of familial responsibilities. In these cases, people might see their life possibilities limited as they need to choose between what provides direct intrinsic wellbeing and what they must do for utilitarian reasons. Is migration voluntary when there are no available options to earn a living in place? How are aspirations formed when capabilities are limited or low?

Finally, differentiating intrinsic from instrumental aspirations eases analyzing how and at what level can socio-cultural expectations either facilitate or hinder one's aspirations, and when and how is (im)mobility mediated, limited, or driven by family members. When and how do members set their intrinsic aspirations aside because of family responsibilities or collective expectations? Does migration in a village characterized by an emigration culture respond to an innate desire to migrate or, instead, does it owe to socio-cultural expectations and obligations?

I hope the proposed approach and questions stimulate research in aspirations and decision-making beyond the extremes of aspiring to migrate and to stay to also capture life's contradictions, uncertainty, and in-betweenness.

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#### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable as no datasets were generated during research.

#### Declarations

##### Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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