



PACES

Making migration and migration policy decisions
amidst societal transformations

Spatial aspirations: exploring the underlying mechanisms that explain volatility

Simona Vezzoli, Dominique Jolivet

International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus
University Rotterdam

Suggested citation

Vezzoli, S. & Jolivet, D. (2026). Spatial aspirations: exploring the underlying mechanisms that explain volatility. PACES Working Paper No. 13. The Hague, International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam

PACES (Making migration and migration policy decisions amidst societal transformation) is a 40-month research project (2023-2026) that examines decisions to stay and migrate over time and space, researches the politics of knowledge in migration policy and seeks to use its insights to inform future migration policies and governance. PACES is carried out by a consortium of 14 partners in Europe, Africa and the USA.

Contact for PACES project

Simona Vezzoli
International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam
Kortenaerkade 12
2518 AX, The Hague, The Netherlands
Website: www.iss.nl/paces

Authors

Simona Vezzoli, vezzoli@iss.nl Dominique Jolivet jolivet@iss.nl

Authors' Note

The present version is preliminary. We are aware of existing gaps and analytical limitations, which will be resolved as we develop this work in the next few months into a full article.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Naiara Rodriguez=Peña, Kerilyn Schewel and Lucia Mytna Kureková for the valuable comments they provided.

The views presented are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the institutions with which they are affiliated.

History of change

Version	Date	Changes	Authors
1	28 April 2026	Version submitted as official deliverable to the EC	S. Vezzoli, D. Jolivet



The PACES project has received funding under the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme, grant agreement N 101094279.



The contents of the document are the sole responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union. The European Union and the granting authority are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

This work © 2026 is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Abstract

This contribution offers new conceptual and analytical tools to explore and qualitatively assess volatility in migration and stay aspirations. By volatility we refer specifically to shifts between aspirations to stay and aspirations and vice versa. In this conceptual and analytical exercise, we explore the sources of uncertainty and the mechanisms underpinning this volatility. We combine the Temporal Multilevel Analysis (TMA) framework, proposed in the PACES project, and future scenario thinking to examine the formation of spatial aspirations, namely preferences to migrate and stay. This framework borrows from various theories and models of migration decision-making and proposes an approach to explore spatial aspirations and how they could evolve in the future. It relies on the notions of past experiences, present perceptions and future expectations of both societal and personal changes and proposes to observe the interaction between societal and life course mechanisms, with insights on how values, social norms and reference groups influence migration aspirations. To demonstrate the value of this conceptual framework, we apply it for the in-depth analysis of 12 residents and 13 migrants in Adama and Kebribeyah (Ethiopia), Mostaganem and Sétif (Algeria), and Abuja and Osogbo (Nigeria) who expressed aspirations to stay, migrate, or return (for migrants). We identified four types of volatility in spatial aspirations and three mechanisms explaining the non-linearity and variability of spatial aspirations. Our study provides a nuanced understanding of the migration decision-making process by contextualizing it within different types of change at the personal and structural levels.

Keywords: spatial aspirations, social transformation, life course, volatility

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	5
2. Previous research on migration and stay aspirations	7
3. Conceptual framework	8
4. Data and context	11
5. Analytical approach: From stated spatial aspirations to scenarios of volatility	14
6. Volatility of spatial aspirations: insights from five cases	17
7. Analytical insights: Volatility types and mechanisms	23
8. Concluding remarks	26
References	28
Annex	31

1. Introduction

Migration aspirations, which can be understood, in their simplest definition, as the conviction that migration is preferred to staying (Carling, 2002, 2014), have been capturing the attention of researchers and policymakers over the past 25 years. For researchers, migration aspirations enable the identification of the conditions that stimulate migration and provide insights on the characteristics of potential migrants. For policymakers, migration aspirations are interpreted as a direct indication of future migration volumes. Yet, despite the certainties that seem to underpin migration aspirations, migration research has shown that they are more volatile than they appear (Carling, 2019; Carling & Schewel, 2018; Migali & Scipioni, 2019). This paper contributes to current discussions on the volatility of migration aspirations and it does so by elaborating plausible individual-based scenarios and drawing insights on the characteristics and circumstances that underpin volatile spatial aspirations.

Given their practical value, migration aspirations have generated a large body of literature, leading to meaningful developments over time (Aslany et al., 2021; Bal & Willems, 2014; Carling, 2019; de Haas, 2021; Jónsson, 2008; Rudolph et al., 2025; Schewel & Fransen, 2018). Two aspects are of particular importance for this paper. First, aspirations to migrate must be considered alongside aspirations to stay, avoiding a mobility bias whereby aspirations to stay are seen as the inability to migrate, the lack of migration ambitions or the lack of ability to aspire for migration (Carling, 2014; de Haas, 2021; Debray et al., 2022; Schewel, 2015; Schewel & Fransen, 2022; Vezzoli, 2022). Migration aspirations must be considered simultaneously as aspirations to stay since the presence of one does not preclude the concurrent existence of the other. In the rest of the paper we refer to 'spatial aspirations' to allow for the fluid considerations that people adopt in their lives when they consider inhabiting a place (Carling 2014).

Second, migration and stay aspirations are increasingly recognized as the first step in the migration decision-making process (Carling, 2019; De Jong & Fawcett, 1981; Halfacree & Boyle, 1993). Time may pass between the moment someone initially forms a preference and the eventual decision and realization of that decision. The preference to stay or migrate may be reconsidered over time – e.g., someone preparing to migrate may halt the process and decide to give staying another try – resulting in non-linear processes as individuals re-think their next step. Thus, migration aspirations may or may not result in actual migration and preferences to stay may result in migration. This may be due to a variety of reasons, including the lack of capability to do so, resulting in various forms of (in)voluntary (im)mobility (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021). However, this paper focuses specifically on the fact that migration may not be actualized because aspiration to stay and migrate can change. Indeed, past research has shown that, in many instances, migration aspirations are underpinned by a diverse set of factors that may themselves transform (Hoppe & Fujishiro, 2015; Kley, 2017). For example, priorities within the household or the family change over time, resulting in shifts or ambivalence in spatial aspirations (Jolivet, 2020). Other times, individuals indicate that they have migration aspirations expressed with 'if...then' statements, suggesting conditional migration aspirations that show uncertainty and challenge the dichotomy of preferences to stay or migrate (Vezzoli, 2023).

How can changes in spatial aspirations be captured? As a starting point, an individual may indicate conditionality, as expressed above, making either staying or migrating dependent on a specific

condition. A change in that condition will result in a shift in aspiration. Second, an individual may give weak or very weak migration or stay aspirations, suggesting that there is not a strong conviction underpinning the current aspiration and that a shift to the opposite side is possible. For this reason, researchers are finding it of great value to measure the degree of spatial aspirations (Rodriguez-Pena, 2024). A third way in which we may anticipate change in spatial aspirations is through a thorough understanding of the underpinning factors that stimulate spatial aspirations. Often these factors are uncertain and, in some instances, very unstable or volatile. Take the context where the economy is restructuring away from agriculture and farmers find that their traditional livelihood is losing its viability. We can hypothesize that initial aspirations to stay would be underpinned by uncertain factors, e.g., availability of fertile land and/or government subsidies in agriculture; as development unfolds some of these factors may change, stimulating aspirations to migrate. In this paper we adopt the definition of uncertainty from the scenario approach, which presents uncertainty as “a ‘contextual’ factor (and migration determinant) about whose future evolution we have an incomplete understanding” (Vezzoli et al. 2017). We aim to observe the uncertain factors that underpin spatial aspirations and how, in turn, they render spatial aspirations volatile. Volatility represents changeable or variable factors over time, and is associated with unpredictability and uncertainty (Daly 2011: 47). In this paper, volatility entails a change of spatial aspirations in the opposite direction.

We seek to closely examine the complex nature of spatial aspirations: how these aspirations are formed, the factors that motivate them, and the uncertainty that naturally surrounds them. To this end, we adopt the Temporal Multilevel Analysis (TMA) framework which borrows from various theories and models of migration decision-making and proposes to explore how developments over time and across analytical levels allows us to explain better the emergence of migration aspirations. Its value lies in attempting to make sense of how these factors – captured by people’s perceptions of what has happened, what is happening, what they believe will happen, and what are good choices for them – interplay, highlighting what matters when and for whom (Vezzoli et al. 2024). In this paper, we start from the TMA framework to analyze the aspirations to stay and migrate of 25 individuals – 12 residents and 13 migrants – of a similar age but very diverse life trajectories and elaborate on the hypothetical volatile nature of their spatial aspiration. To make it clear, we are not interested in their ability to realize their aspirations, rather we explore the mechanisms that underpin potential significant shifts in spatial aspirations and we seek to disentangle the sources of uncertainty that shape the volatility of spatial aspirations. We also seek to identify whether certain mechanisms and types of uncertainty may be associated with specific individuals or circumstances.

To do so, we carry out a thorough analysis that accounts for people's spatial aspirations in relation to their understanding of their community, their life course, values, norms and reference points. The inclusion of residents and migrants in our study points to our interest in exploring whether in the potential pre-migration period experienced by residents, the mechanisms and factors that shape the volatility of spatial aspirations differ from the post-migration period of migrants, when the act of migration is part of a personal (direct) experience, thus reducing certain unknowns and anxieties potentially associated with migration.

After a brief literature review, this paper will present the conceptual framework, the data and the analytical approach. The paper then continues with the presentation of five cases, before the analytical discussion and concluding remarks.

2. Previous research on migration and stay aspirations

Since Carling defined migration aspirations as “a belief that migration is preferable to non-migration” (2002: 12) a quarter of a century ago, migration aspirations have been the focus of a wide range of research. Important research has put an emphasis on the spatial dimension of migration aspirations and observations that space delimits possibilities in people’s lives and what they hope to achieve (Carling 2014:9). Others has presented insights on how migration aspirations have a temporal dimension leading to a definition of migration aspirations as “purposeful constructions of the future which evolve over time” (2017: 1). Moreover, the recognition that migration aspirations must be considered along with aspirations to stay has prompted a move away from a mobility bias that assumes the normalcy of mobility and brings attention to decisions to stay put, particularly in circumstances where migration seems to be advantageous (Debray et al., 2023; Schewel, 2020).

Some researchers have indicated that expressions of migration aspirations must be evaluated carefully to assess their strength and value for individuals. A focus on the value of migration aspirations and how they operate reveals that aspirations to migrate may be instrumental, when they are a means to an end, or intrinsic value, when migration alone fulfils a purpose, leading a person to feel satisfied the moment they migrate (Carling, 2014; de Haas, 2021). Rodriguez-Pena (2024) elaborated on how these two types may interplay, resulting in various intensities and configurations of aspirations. This points takes us back to the migration-stay aspiration continuum and the suggestion that we must account for the strength of spatial aspirations so as to determine their robustness. The strongest spatial aspiration found at the extremes of the migration-stay continuum appear to be more reliable, while those in the middle are weak or very weak, signalling low conviction and unpredictable answers “heavily dependent on the context and the formulation of the question.” (Carling 2014: 4). Individuals with spatial aspirations in the middle might feel ambivalent and hold conflicting feelings regarding both their places of origin and destination, caused by manifold factors including uncertainty, contradictions between social roles and individual aspirations (Boccagni & Kivisto, 2019), or social positions that prevent individuals from living according to their values (Merton & Barber, 1963). Ambivalence is often closely linked to processes of inclusion and exclusion (Belloni, 2019; Bolzman & Bridji, 2019) and related to social environments that evolve at a different speed and direction than individuals’ aspirations and expectations (Jolivet 2026). In the middle we also find those who are caught in ‘if...then’ scenarios (Vezzoli 2023). The group in the middle waits to see new developments of uncertain factors (conditionality) before making a decision, or may decide due to a lack of change (ambivalence).

Existing migration research has explored changing spatial aspirations, namely their volatility. Sudden changes in the context, such as crop failure or a flood (Rudolph et al., 2025) and important life course events, such as being accepted at university, finding a job or getting married (de Haas, 2021) may alter initial migration or staying aspirations. When considering meso-level factors, shifts in aspirations may be associated with the acquisition of new information and social networks, such as learning about changes in a desired destination or the appearance of a sudden job opportunity through a friend (Boccagni, 2017), as well as institutional and policy changes, such as the increased cost of a passport or a visa (de Haas et al., 2019). Certainly, a change in spatial aspirations may emerge in reaction to a serendipitous occurrence, while attitudes, personalities and moods may also play a role (Carling 2019).

These observations reveal that asking about migration preferences is a delicate task that requires careful measures. Significant efforts have gone into identifying the best questions and tools to capture migration aspirations and to acknowledge the pitfalls that may emerge from research design (Aslany et al., 2021; Carling, 2019; Carling & Schewel, 2018; Migali & Scipioni, 2018). This challenge is visible when we consider survey results, such as migration aspirations measured in the Gallup poll, which “were actually mopping up a number of other issues that – while deserving to be studied on their own - may have had little to do with concrete intentions to migrate” (Migali & Scipioni, 2019, p. 188).

The difficulty in relying on data on migration aspirations as a meaningful and informative predictive measure of upcoming and future migration reveals the need for a deeper understanding of spatial aspirations through the exploration of the underlying mechanisms that explain the volatile nature of migration aspirations. We know that aspirations are “dynamic and malleable, and come into being through social practices and discourse” (Carling 2014:10). Meaningful elements in the formation of spatial aspirations include structural factors (Aslany et al., 2021; Carling & Talleraas, 2016; Czaika & Reinprecht, 2022), the life course (Clark & Lisowski, 2017; Findlay et al., 2015; Kley, 2011; Kley & Mulder, 2010), less tangible factors such as “sets of values, interests and rights” (Aslany et al., 2021; Boccagni, 2017, p. 14; Hagen-Zanker & Hennessey, 2021; Hagen-Zanker et al., 2023), and references groups that generate comparisons and may engender feelings of relative deprivation or endowment (Chindarkar, 2014; Stark & Yitzhaki, 1988; Vezzoli, 2022). None of these factors operate alone but in interaction, so that the possibility of marriage and building a family (life course) meets the ability to find a satisfying job in the desired sector (context and interests), which explain the aspirations to stay. A change in some of these factors, however, such as a new partner's own migration aspirations, may lead to a change toward an aspiration to migrate over time. This paper sets out to explore the interplay of structural and personal factors as stimuli of spatial aspirations that are everchanging and uncertain, and lead to volatile spatial aspirations. The next section presents the conceptual framework that we adopt to identify and categorize this volatility.

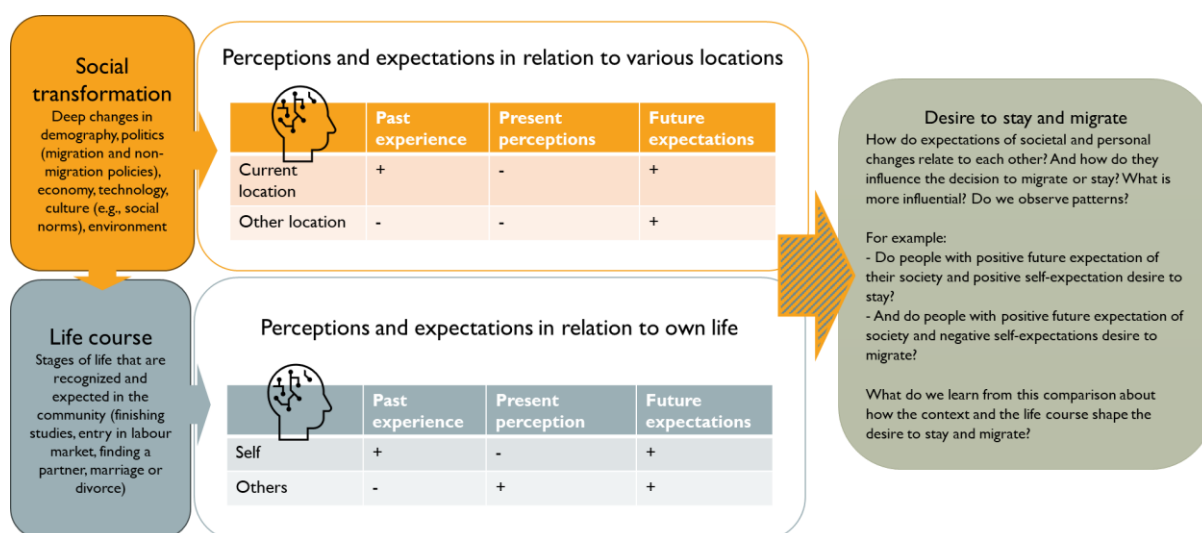
3. Conceptual framework

How can we account for the complex and volatile nature of migration and stay aspirations? Spatial aspirations emerge out of a wide variety of societal and personal circumstances, hold diverse meanings and objectives and, ultimately, may not always be necessarily linked to actual migration.

Strong divergences between migration aspirations and actual migrations may occur in communities with a culture of migration, where it is socially expected to express migration aspirations, while in practice a person may not have strong intentions to migrate. Most often, a person’s migration aspirations may fade away due to a turn of events that either make migration undesirable or make staying worthwhile. In other cases, migration aspirations could simply represent a way to express discontent, or estrangement without a real aspiration to leave that place. The volatile nature of migration aspirations remains a challenging aspect in migration research, which we explore by embedding it in a framework that studies the emergence and persistence of aspirations to stay or migrate into a person’s life decisions.

The Temporal Multilevel Analysis (TMA) framework examines the process of coming to a decision to stay or migrate rooted in social transformation and life course changes. This framework elicits individuals’ experiences of the past, perceptions of the present and expectations of the future as elements that, together, influence preferences to stay and migrate. Rather than accounting for the objective changes in society, the TMA framework records the changes that people notice and that influence their view on opportunities both locally and elsewhere. The TMA also seeks to take account of people’s values, the social norms about migration on which they rely and important reference points that shape their decisions. The TMA framework accounts for the complexity and the comparative nature that underpin the formation of preferences to stay and migrate (visually sketched in Figure 1). It brings together the temporal and spatial elements into one process and envisions how individuals constantly account for the societal aspects and their personal preferences in their decision-making. In the coming paragraphs we elaborate further on how to operationalize the TMA framework to better understand the volatility of spatial aspirations.

Figure 1. Decision-making rooted in social transformation and life course



Source: Vezzoli et al. (2024: 30)

While seemingly eclectic, the TMA framework simply brings together components that have been well-acknowledged in migration research and gives a pathway to explore complex questions such as, what does the process of infrastructural development mean for people in a community who may benefit from it but whose livelihoods may also be significantly impacted by those development

initiatives? And how do these experiences and perceptions influence spatial aspirations? The basis for such questions are actual infrastructural changes, but what matters in people's decision-making mechanism are their own perceptions, whether what they value is altered by the changes (e.g., perception of progress or social support in the community), what points of references they use to make sense of the present and their possible futures (e.g., development in other oil-rich countries for Algerians) and how their social norms on migration influence their spatial options (e.g., migration is desirable only for a single man).

The TMA framework attempts to make sense of how these factors interplay, what matters when and for whom. Moreover, it puts the passage of time centre stage, giving space to observe how people continuously change – on their own, as they grow – but also in reaction to what happens in the space that they inhabit. These may be captured in people's perceptions of what is happening, what they believe will happen, and what are good decisions for them. Moreover, this framework pays renewed attention to reference points, including groups and places, as comparative elements that enter people's mental map, often subconsciously, during the decision-making process. Reference groups have been found to be important in migration decisions in communities where non-migrants' exposure to migrants and their relative wealth generates relative deprivation and engenders a desire to pursue migration (Stark, 1984). Reference groups are relevant in shaping social behavior in various circumstances (Mo, 2018; Runciman, 1966) and it is not unusual for individuals to refer to themselves and others not only in the present, but also in the past (Smith & Huo, 2014). Individuals' reference points may thus provide valuable insights on shifting spatial aspirations.

The logic that emerges from the TMA framework conceives people making sense of their place of residence and evaluate their own position in society. Hypothetically, the comparison between societal and personal perceptions and expectations reveals a (mis)match between 'what is' and 'what is desired', exposing a potential desire for change at each of these two levels. When a desire for change emerges, the individual evaluates whether the necessary change to fulfil one's valued goals can take place *in situ* or elsewhere. Through this systematic process, we gain an informed understanding of what explains aspirations to stay and migrate and the strength of these aspirations.

But what happens when the sense-making of 'what is' is clouded by uncertainties in society or in people's personal lives? In everyday decision-making, people perceive different degrees of reliable knowledge and uncertainty in their environment and their personal lives; the more uncertainties depart from one's expectations – e.g. insecurity in the labor market suggests I will not be able to get the job I desire –, the more people may look for alternatives. And when changes are frequent, namely when there is volatility, people may be in a sustained state of exploration for alternatives (Bland and Schaefer 2012). Thus, volatility perceived in the environment and personal life may result in the volatility of spatial aspirations, which should then be considered neither an outlier nor difficult to explain as aspirations emerge from uncertain factors. The analytical approach is operationalized in full after the introduction of the data and context.

4. Data and context

The data used in this paper comes from a large research project on migration and migration policy decisions that collected data in eleven countries in Africa and Europe. In this paper, we rely on data collected in Adama and Kebribeyah (Ethiopia), Mostaganem and Sétif (Algeria), and Abuja and Osogbo (Nigeria). These six cities have distinct characteristics in terms of their populations, economies, infrastructural development and social structures, but their inhabitants share similar perceptions of the profound impact of development and urbanisation processes in their lives and in their community (see Table A1 in Annex for overview the cities' characteristics). In these six cities we observe varying migration aspirations that can be partially explained by their diverse migration histories within distinct migration corridors in terms of destinations, formal and informal migration practices and migration policy frameworks. These different dynamics offer an opportunity to compare and identify similar mechanisms that explain preferences to stay and migrate and volatility in spatial aspirations in different contexts.

The interviews covered demographic details on the interviewee and their family, significant events in their life, and questions about perceived and expected changes at the structural and personal levels. There were some differences between the questions asked to residents and migrants. Residents were asked about their personal traits, their preferences and choices about life, perceived changes in the community (past-present and also future expectations for overall community and personal conditions), social aspects of the community, including history of internal and international migration in the community, social norms and migration aspirations in the community, migration and non-migration policies and personal aspirations to stay or migrate. For migrants, the questionnaire captured the interviewees' migration experience and details on their migration journey, life in the community with insight from their community of origin and current place of residence and future expectations, personal aspirations to stay, migrate onward or return and role of migration policies in their spatial decisions. The main differences between the two questionnaires are that for residents, past and present perceptions referred to the community of residence, while migrants were asked about the perceptions of their present community of residence and the past experiences of their place of origin. Moreover, for migrants, attention was given to how the decision to migrate came about and their journey.

The interviews contained both open- and close-ended questions. This approach sought to generate both qualitative and quantitative data. First, we asked open questions and then asked to 'summarize' the answer with a short close-ended answer. For example, we asked, "Can you please tell me about general life in this community? Think of a combination of factors such as quality of life, social connections, and its pace of life. You can refer to one group, several groups, or in general." This question was then followed by the closed-ended question "Would you say that your life in this community today is..." offering five Likert scale options. Finally, each participant was asked the following questions about spatial aspirations. The first question was:

"Ideally, would you like to go somewhere else to live or work during the next five years, or would you prefer to stay here? Please answer this question thinking about what you can

realistically do. Consider what you hope will happen and what you are aiming for in the next five years.”

After this question, interviewees were asked other questions about their motives, their potential destinations, the need for documents, their awareness of migration policies (information campaigns, returnees), and access to migration brokers. Before concluding the interview, interviewees were asked,

“After having asked all these questions, could you please indicate where you stand right now in your aspiration to stay or migrate (or return for migrants)?”

At this point, interviewees were also asked to provide the intensity of this aspiration as they were asked

“Where do you stand right now in your aspiration to stay/migrate/return? Would you say that your migration/stay/return aspirations today are...

To the two questions on spatial aspirations, participants could answer: Migrate, stay, return (only for migrants). The option to assess the intensity were: Very weak, weak, neither weak nor strong, strong, very strong, I do not know, and refused to respond.

We relied on the quantitative data to identify the participants to analyse in depth. Out of the 243 resident and 63 migrant interviews collected in the six cities, we selected interviews of 12 residents and 13 migrants for in-depth analysis. We used the first question on spatial aspirations within the next five years¹ as one of the main criteria to select the 25 cases for our in-depth analysis.² We aimed at selecting interviewees (four in each city, out of which two migrants) with similar profiles in terms of age, gender, marital status and parental responsibilities. We initially targeted young single men without children based on the common assumption that they have more freedom to move and are less reluctant to take risks. We also aimed to select similar profiles in terms of education level. Another key element in the selection of cases was interviewees’ diverse spatial aspirations: in each city we selected one participant who aspires to migrate and one to stay; for migrants, we did not always have the diversity necessary as in Kebribeyah nobody aspired to stay. In practice, to ensure this diversity and due to the limited number of interviews with migrants, we had to add more diversity in interviewees’ life-course characteristics. This resulted in a selection of 20 men and 5 women between 23 and 35 years old, mainly single and without children (3 married with children). Their level of education is diverse: 12 have a secondary level of education, 9 a bachelor diploma and four a master’s degree. In each city, one resident aspired to stay and one to migrate. Of the migrant interviewees selected four aspired to stay in their city of residence, five to migrate onward and four aspired to return, one in Mostaganem, two in Osogbo and one in Sétif. One migrant in Osogbo aimed to return before migrating onward. Migrants’ country of birth was diverse, but both interviewees in Kebribeyah were from Somalia (Table 1).

¹ Across the 150 interviews, most participants provided the same answer to both migration aspiration questions.

² We decided to include an additional migrant in Sétif given their diverse distribution of aspirations across staying, migrating and returning.

Table 1. Characteristics of the selected cases

Residents									
City	Gender	Age	Civil Status	Children	Education level	Working	Stated spatial aspirations	Country of origin	Reference³
Kebribeyah	man	24	Single	no	Secondary	no	Stay	n.a.	KF6R
Kebribeyah	man	27	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	yes	Migrate	n.a.	KA4R
Mostaganem	man	31	Single	no	Master's degree	no	Stay	n.a.	M9ZR
Mostaganem	man	23	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	yes	Migrate	n.a.	MZ35R
Osogbo	man	23	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	no	Migrate	n.a.	OR4R
Osogbo	woman	24	Single	no	Master's degree	yes	Stay	n.a.	OA2R
Adama	man	29	Single	no	Secondary	no	Stay	n.a.	AL12R
Adama	woman	23	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	yes	Migrate	n.a.	AZ11R
Abuja	man	33	Single	no	Secondary	yes	Migrate (weak)	n.a.	AP12R
Abuja	man	31	Single	no	Master's degree	yes	Stay	n.a.	AP2R
Sétif	man	21	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	yes	Stay	n.a.	SZ39R
Sétif	man	20	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	yes	Migrate	n.a.	SZ18R
Migrants									
Kebribeyah	man	26	Married	yes	Secondary	yes	Migrate onward	Somalia	KD3M
Kebribeyah	man	32	Single	no	Secondary	yes	Migrate onward	Somalia	KD10M
Mostaganem	man	26	Single	no	Master's degree	no	Return	Mauritania	MZ02M
Mostaganem	man	32	Single	no	Secondary	yes	Migrate onward	Guinea Conakry	MZ05M
Osogbo	man	27	Married	yes	Secondary	yes	Return	Benin	OS2M
Osogbo	man	35	Married	yes	Secondary	yes	Return, then migrate onward	Ghana	OA2M
Adama	woman	18	Single	no	Secondary	no	Stay	Yemen	AT7M
Adama	man	24	Single	no	Secondary	yes	Migrate	Eritrea	AT6M
Abuja	woman	29	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	no	Stay	Cameroon	AP2M
Abuja	man	28	Single	yes	Secondary	no	Stay	Cameroon	AJ4M
Sétif	man	25	Single	no	Secondary	yes	Stay	Syria	SZ01M
Sétif	man	24	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	no	Migrate	Uganda	SZ05M
Sétif	woman	20	Single	no	Bachelor's Degree	no	Return	Mali	SZ09M

³ In bold are the cases we presented in-depth in the next section.

5. Analytical approach: From stated spatial aspirations to scenarios of volatility

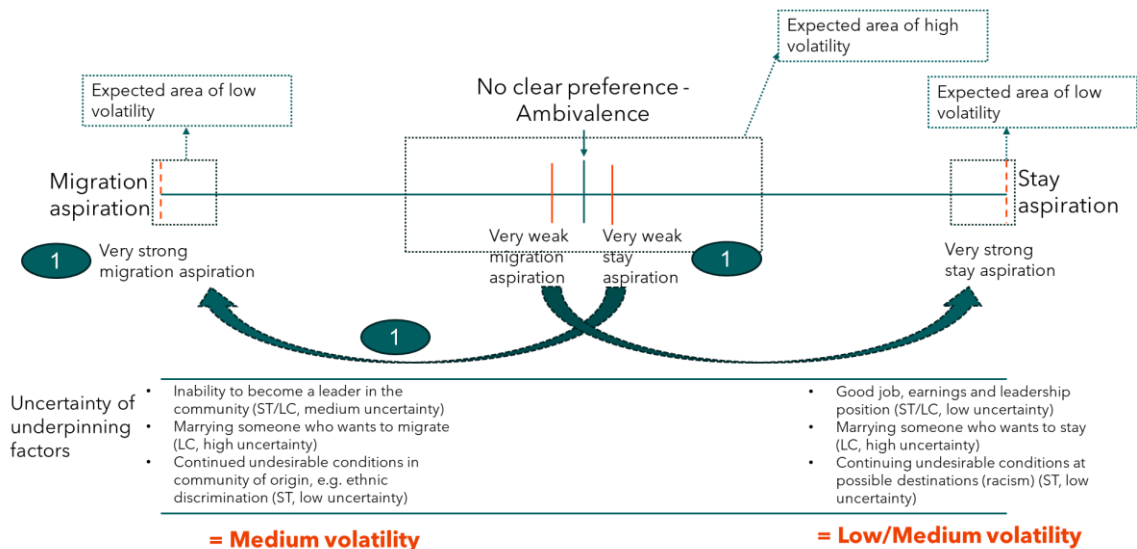
To examine the mechanisms that may lead to the alteration of spatial aspirations over time, hence their volatility, we relied on a model that visually plotted participants' spatial aspirations and their strength at the time of the interview along the migration-stay continuum, where aspirations could be plotted from very strong to very weak (upper portion of Figure 2). We hypothesized that in the central section of the continuum, where migration and stay aspirations are weak and very weak, we may observe ambivalence and high volatility. That is, in the middle there is a high degree of uncertainty that may shift spatial aspirations in opposite directions. The extremities, on the other hand, would correspond to low volatility given people very strong aspirations to stay or migrate.

As a second step, we identified the motives underpinning spatial aspirations as well as general life aspirations, structural and personal constraints, and norms that were meaningful for participants' spatial aspirations. In the lower portion of the model (Figure 2), we tracked the factors that each participant presented as important in their life and relevant for migration. Each of these factors was coded as a social transformation factor (ST), a life course factor (LC) or perhaps a combination of the two. In an earlier section of this paper we present how the factors underpinning aspirations may be uncertain. Uncertainty may be measured in degrees, in ordinal rather than cardinal terms, to indicate the degree of absence of reliable knowledge (Dequench 1999). We also know that as people make decisions, both knowledge acquisition and creativity are utilized (Dequench 2011). We then assessed, based on the knowledge available from the interview and a small dose of imagination and creativity, the degree of uncertainty of the factors that may alter the spatial aspiration in the opposite direction. Relying on imagination and creativity is part and parcel of scenario thinking with its attempts to better understand "processes aimed at coping with the future" and to provide "an alternative mode of theorizing that provides an explicit process, but features the intuitive and creative components" (Chermack 2007: 6).

Based on the degrees of uncertainty, we assigned a degree of volatility to the current spatial aspiration. Example 1 in Figure 2 shows the process of this elaboration of a person (case OA2R) with very weak stay aspirations who may develop very strong migration aspirations in the eventuality of the inability to become a leader in the community (medium uncertainty), if she married someone who lives abroad or wants to emigrate (high uncertainty), and/or found that undesirable living conditions in the current place of residence continued (low to medium uncertainty). Each of these factors has a different degree of uncertainty, which we could assess overall as a medium to high degree of uncertainty. As a result, we assessed that in this example, this participant's current very weak stay aspiration has a medium degree of volatility; namely there is a medium level chance that she may develop strong or very strong migration aspirations. We acknowledge that these assessments are based on a high degree of subjective judgement; however, because we are dealing with uncertainty of potential future change, we find that scenario thinking is particularly valuable to elaborate possible shifts in social, economic and cultural dynamics and in human behavior (Walker et al. 2003: 13-14).

Through this imperfect but logical and intuitive approach we can set guidelines for understanding future change in spatial aspirations.

Figure 2. Sample migration-stay aspiration continuum and relative volatility



To carry out this analysis, we relied on the interview transcripts and close-ended questionnaire answers to complete this template. We started with the participants' stated present and future (5-year) spatial aspirations. Participants were almost always constant in their migration aspirations at present and within five years.⁴ In other words, comparing the results of the two closed-ended questions on spatial aspirations (at the time of the interviews and in the coming 5 years), interviewees provided consistent replies, suggesting that participants felt certain about their position. However, we were aware of cases with conditional statements, which suggested that some volatility existed. Thus we decided to continue with the analysis of the participants' entire narrative to observe how they felt about their personal and societal situation in the present and the past and their future expectations. In particular, we observed the motives underpinning their spatial aspirations, their values, social norms and reference points. We identified all the factors that appeared relevant for their spatial aspirations. The analysis relied on the following questions:

- How are people understanding their context?
- What are their experiences within the context (in it and in relation to it) and in their personal life?
- What are their values? Do they match those in the community or not?
- What are their social norms? Do they match those in the community or not?
- What are their reference points? And how do they seem to shape their decisions?
- In the end, how do the context and life course elements interplay and shape their decisions?
- And is there a difference between those who stay and those who want to migrate?

⁴ Only one case, AP2R, aspired to stay at the time of the interview, but aspired to migrate in five years.

The cases presented below (Table 2) show a variety of scenarios that illustrate possible volatility in spatial aspirations among individuals who expressed spatial aspirations with different levels of strength. For each, we identified the types of factors that shape participants' spatial aspirations. These factors include personal and family circumstances, structural elements (e.g. opportunities in the labour market), preferences, values, and priorities. We then imagined scenarios about how these factors could shift within five years due to life course and social change, and subsequently qualitatively assessed the degree volatility of their aspirations (low, medium, high). Providing a comprehensive set of objective criteria to assess the degree of volatility falls beyond the scope of this study.

Table 2. Spatial aspirations and volatility assessment*

No.	Country	Case/reference	Ideally, in 5 years	Spatial Aspiration now	Degree (very weak to very strong)	Volatility (very low to very high)	ST factors	LC factors
RESIDENTS								
1	Ethiopia	KF6R	Stay	Stay	Very strong	Low volatility		x
2	Ethiopia	KA4R	Migrate	Migrate	Very strong	Low to medium volatility		x
3	Algeria	M9ZR	Stay	Stay	Very strong	Low volatility	x	x
4	Algeria	MZ35R	Migrate	Migrate	Very strong	Low volatility	x	x
5	Nigeria	OR4R	Migrate	Migrate	Strong	Medium volatility		x
6	Nigeria	OA2R	Stay	Stay	Weak	Medium to high volatility		x
7	Ethiopia	AL12R	Stay	Stay	Very strong	Very high volatility	x	x
8	Ethiopia	AZ11R	Migrate	Migrate	Very strong	Low volatility		x
9	Nigeria	AP2R	Migrate	Stay	Very strong	Very high volatility		x
10	Nigeria	AP12R	Stay	Stay	Very strong	Low volatility	x	x
11	Algeria	SZ18R	Migrate	Migrate	Neither weak nor strong	Very low volatility		x
12	Algeria	SZ39R	Stay	Stay	Very strong	Low volatility	x	x
MIGRANTS								
13	Ethiopia	KD3M	Migrate	Migrate	Very strong	Low volatility		x
14	Ethiopia	KD10M	Migrate	Migrate	Very strong	Low volatility	x	
15	Algeria	MZ02M	Return	Return	Very strong	Low volatility		x
16	Algeria	MZ05M	Migrate	Migrate	Very strong	Medium volatility		x
17	Nigeria	OS2M	Return	Return	Very strong	Low volatility		x
18	Nigeria	OA2M	Return	Return	Very strong	No volatility	x	
19	Ethiopia	AT6M	Migrate	Migrate	Strong	Low to medium volatility		x
20	Ethiopia	AT7M	Stay	Stay	Neither weak nor strong	Low to medium volatility	x	x
21	Nigeria	AP2M	Stay	Stay	Very strong	Low to medium volatility	x	x
22	Nigeria	AJ4M	Stay	Stay	Very strong	Very high volatility		x
23	Algeria	SZ01M	Stay	Stay	Strong	Low volatility	x	x
24	Algeria	SZ05M	Migrate	Migrate	Very strong	Medium volatility		x
25	Algeria	SZ09M	Return	Return	Don't know	No volatility	x	x

*Data in black reported by participants and in red assessed by researchers

Before elaborating on five cases that reveal valuable future scenarios of volatility in spatial aspiration, the 25 cases in our sample show the following: two have no volatility, one very low volatility, 11 low volatility and four low to medium volatility, meaning that the participant would most likely keep the same aspirations within the next five years, albeit possibly with a different degree of strength. Three cases showed medium volatility, one medium to high, and three very high volatility. In sum, our assessment indicated that in 7 of the 25 cases we would expect some shifts in spatial aspiration. In the next section, we present five cases to illustrate how we elaborated the micro-scenarios and assessed volatility.

6. Volatility of spatial aspirations: insights from five cases

For the purpose of presenting this analytical model and process, we elaborate on five cases, two with low volatility, one low to medium, one medium and one medium to high.

Table 3. Spatial aspiration and volatility of five cases presented

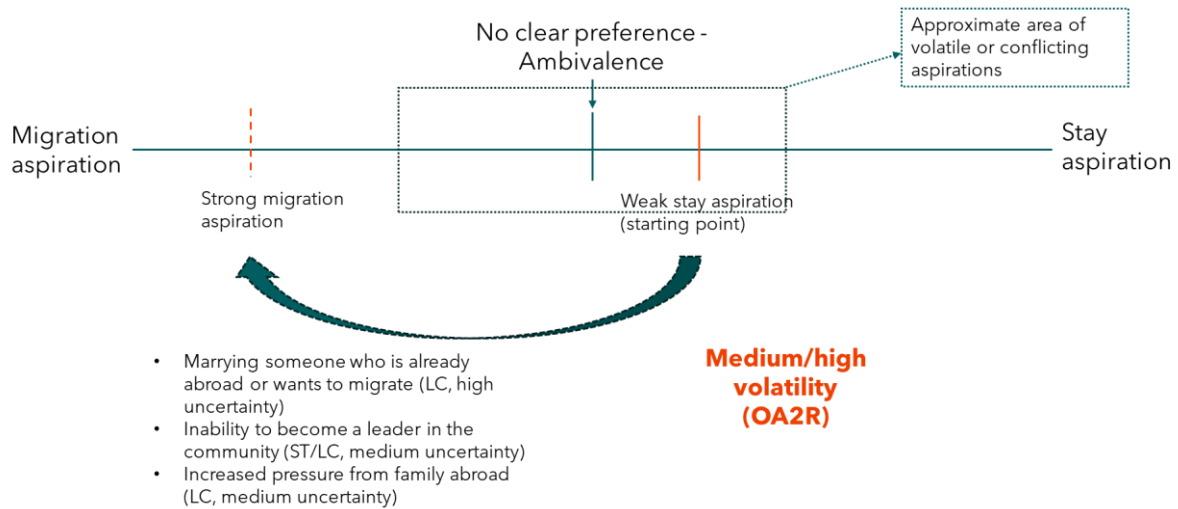
CASES:	One: Woman working on healthcare justice (OA2R)	Two: Man with BA, hotel manager supporting siblings (KA4R)	Three: Man finishing technical school, aspires to luxury (OR4R)	Four: Man who feels he does not fit in (MZ35AR)	Five: Mauritanian male student (MZ02M)
Volatility	Medium to High	Low to Medium	Medium	Low	Low
Spatial aspiration	Weak stay	Strong leave	Strong leave	Strong leave	Strong return

Case 1

The first case is that of a young (24) single woman from Osogbo, Nigeria (OA2R) who holds a master’s degree and is working at an NGO that focuses on health justice. She has positive view of the city, particularly in comparison to other Nigerian cities where she has lived. Osogbo offers a peaceful and secure life and meets the needs in her personal life. When asked about her spatial aspirations within 5 years in an ‘ideal’ situation, the participant answered, “I would love to stay, but I don’t know”. The factors that influence her decision to stay are captured in this quote, “If there’s a erm better, if my... our economic system can improve, then if also I get the opportunity, the better opportunities in my field, like job, a good, well-paying job that can, you know, afford me a better life.” Staying brings her “peace”, but she may lose “economic stability”. When asked about the need for documents and its effects on her, she perceived migration is “draining, it’s consuming and all that”. To the question about

where she stands right now in the aspiration to stay or migrate she answered, “For now, stay” – the strength of her stay aspirations is “weak” (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Volatility in spatial mobility of woman from Osogbo (Nigeria)



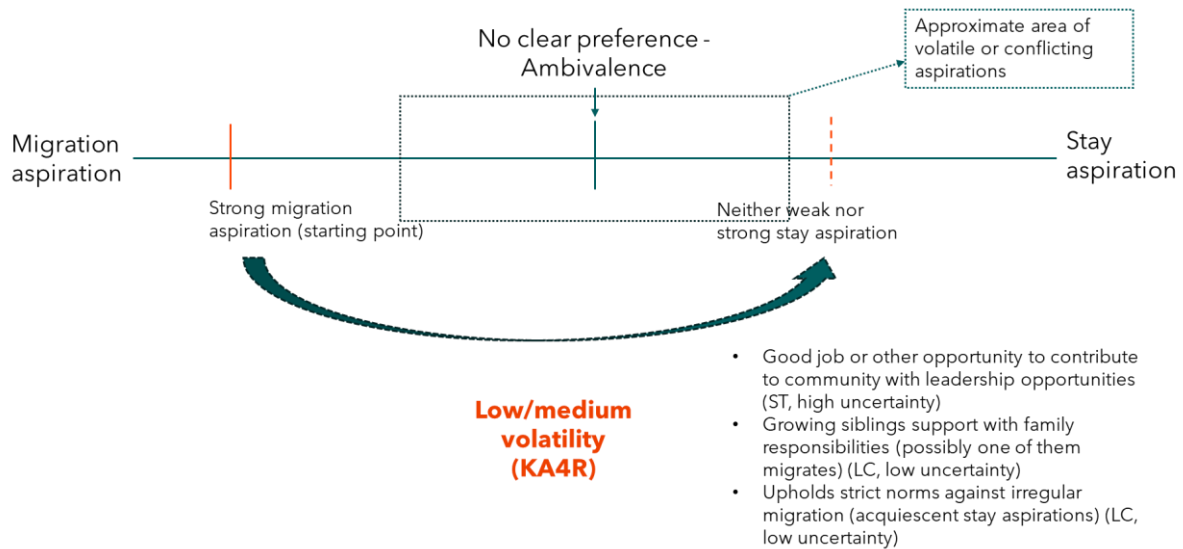
The factors that may shape her spatial mobility aspirations relate to her personal ambitions in interaction with developments in society, some of which are uncertain. Her desire to find a husband and start a family may come to be and she may settle in Osogbo or leave, should the husband aspire to migrate. We can also think of her desire for leadership in the healthcare sector not to develop as desired, engendering stronger aspirations to migrate and fulfil her life aspiration elsewhere. We can also envision that the family abroad may put some pressure on her to migrate and that they may relieve some of the burden associated with the process of migration that she currently feels. Given the uncertainty of the economy, her ability to have a leadership position, and her family formation options, we assess that this participant’s stay aspirations are medium to highly volatile. The focus on these factors and their possible shifts were gathered from focus points in this woman’s narrative. We also observe that, in this case, the emergence of migration aspirations seems to be primarily driven by life course factors.

Case 2

This is the case of a 27-year-old unmarried Ethiopian man (KA4R) with a BA degree from Jijiga University working as a hotel monitoring officer for a private company. He has a rather negative opinion of the community and city where he lives as well as of his personal life. He does not have good expectation either for the community or his personal life *in situ*. He is currently financially responsible for his younger siblings. His life aspirations include helping the young people in the community, “I would assist in building their skills, provide financial support, attract organisations that can develop the local economy and create job opportunities, and bring in technical colleges where they can gain practical skills.” Ideally, he would like to migrate in the next 5 years, saying “I do not anticipate any significant change that could bring a major economic impact. Nothing is expected to change that could bring a major economic impact. Nothing is expected to change, but when I get to abroad, I will be able

to accomplish everything, which I am willing to do in the next five years as I have waited for opportunities for so long that aren't arriving." He confirms his migration aspirations at the end of the interview, indicating that they are 'strong' and that "the primary reason [for not migrating] is the lack of sufficient funds to support migration plans."

Figure 4. Volatility in spatial mobility of man from Kebribeyah (Ethiopia)



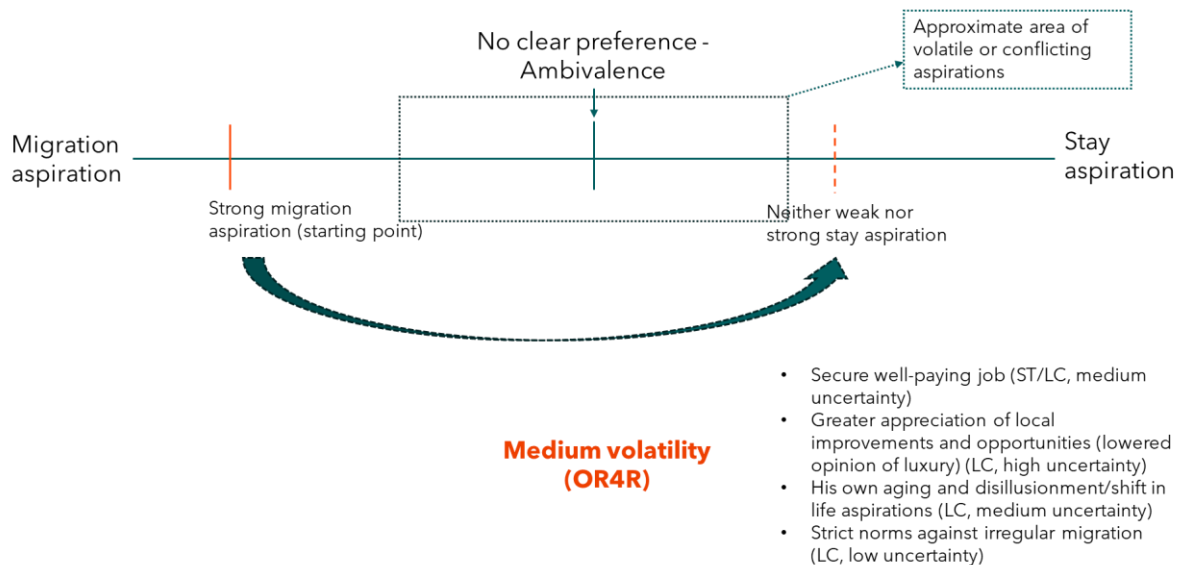
Should this young man not migrate within the next five years, it is possible that he will develop even stronger migration aspirations if economic opportunities worsened or if he saw more people emigrating. Currently he comments that his friends and the rich people in the community have emigrated. The possibility of a scholarship or to get a job through a labor recruitment programme may keep his migration aspirations alive. However, family circumstances may change, for instance, one or two of his siblings may be able to get a job, take on some family leadership, or migrate, freeing him from his main breadwinner role and enabling him to take a risk and migrate irregularly, as long as he relaxes some of his norms about irregular migration. On the other hand, it is also possible to see how he may be able to get a better, more lucrative job or to gain a role of leadership in the community. Both are possibilities as, in late 2024, a new hotel and a vocational training centre were opening in the community. Finally, acquiescence may set in as a result of the difficulties of migrating regularly and the unwillingness to migrate irregularly (Figure 4). Given these factors, we assess that this participant's migration aspiration has a volatility of low to medium. Any aspiration to stay that may emerge in the future is likely to be driven by either life course or social transformation factors or both.

Case 3

This third case is a 23-year-old Nigerian man (OR4R) who is in the process of completing his vocational degree. He has a positive view of the community at present and in the future, but feels ambivalent about his own life at present. His major complaint is the high cost of living. He feels that his life needs to progress in the future, but he does seem to see it possible locally. His life aspirations are oriented towards 'success'. When asked about his life aspirations, he answered, "I will say like the celebrities and the big people like they are the ones behind, like they are the inspiration behind being successful,

because when you look at their lifestyle everything is fancy and luxurious even though they go through their own problems, so I think that alone is enough to motivate you to keep going.” He appears to have limited connection to the community as his gaze is on making money and the local high cost of living and low salaries, which are unsuitable to achieve his goal. Ideally, he wants to migrate in five years, simply indicating that it is due to “economical factors” and “cost of living”. He concludes the interview indicating a strong aspiration to migrate (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Volatility in spatial mobility of man from Osogbo (Nigeria)



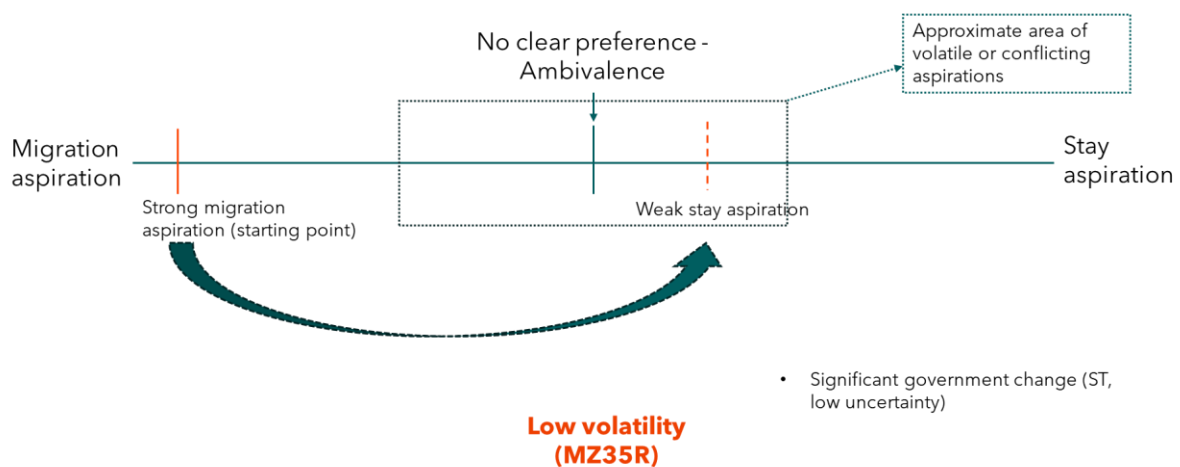
Given the strong emphasis on success and money, it is plausible to elaborate that his aspirations may shift in either direction. His migration aspiration may become very strong should he not find a job after finishing his training or find a job with very low compensation, making him develop more negative ideas about the community and its opportunities. In such a situation, he may feel more pressure – from the family or the community – to gain experience, earn money and become financially independent, engendering greater migration aspirations. Under these circumstances, he may relax his strong stance against irregular migration. However, he may secure a well-paying job after finishing his training and he may develop greater appreciation for local opportunities. At the same time, a shift in life aspirations as part of his growth towards adulthood may lead him towards staying, particularly if he continues to hold norms against irregular migration, as one goes “with all the proper papers [...] to avoid any embarrassment.” And “I can’t just migrate and disappear and go there and become a burden to the country, so I have to like, prepare well, make money, yes.” We assess this participant’s migration aspirations to have medium volatility. As with the previous two cases, it is primarily life course factors that may make him shift towards staying, although social transformation factors, particularly a change in employment and wages underpin such a change.

Case 4

This is the intriguing case of a 23-year-old man who works as a plumber (MZ35R). He holds a bachelor's degree and a diploma in plumbing. He lives with his family and has a good relationship with his father, but prefers not to work in the family business; being self-sufficient and able to cover his basic needs are important to him. He always lived in Mostaganem, but migration in the community has had a great

impact on his life. His previous experience as a low-income student triggered his desire to migrate. He remembers wanting to dress well, and feeling relatively deprived when he compared his situation to other young people who had migrated; “especially when you talk to them and they tell you there's a big difference between here and there, even though they don't have papers and have other problems". Since then, he has aspired to migrate to Europe. For instance, he has an aunt in France who promised to help him if he got there. The United States or the Gulf countries are also good destinations. He refuses to get married before he achieves his “strong” migration aspirations (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Volatility in spatial mobility of man from Mostaganem (Algeria)



He feels misplaced in Mostaganem. Along with new investments and real estate developments, life has become more uncertain and there's increasing pressure on the existing infrastructures. It has become more difficult to find a suitable job after university or building a house before marrying. To him, “the problem is not just economic”. He aspires to live in a place where governance is not as short term as in Mostaganem, with more green areas, and where people are less materialistic and classist. His migration aspirations are strongly anchored in his belief that with migration you become “a good person”. These beliefs, the lack of identification with people’s values in Mostaganem and his personal aspirations for more economic “comfort” are what make him see the people and the new urban developments in a very negative light. These beliefs appear unlikely to change unless there was a sudden and significant government change that could increase his hope to achieve the life he aspires in his city of birth.

Analyzing this case, we wondered why this young working man – who holds negative experiences and perceptions of Mostaganem, low personal life satisfaction, does not have family obligations, holds professional skills that are highly demanded in other countries, and contacts and family members living in Europe – may not have migrated yet, regularly or irregularly. After all, he does not express any particularly strong views against irregular migration. This background information triggered the question as to what extent migration aspirations could simply be a way to escape with his imagination from a difficult personal situation. It is then plausible to think that his migration aspirations will remain in place, making them low volatile, but that actual migration may never take place. We certainly cannot exclude that an opportunity may arise that will encourage him to leave, but what seems

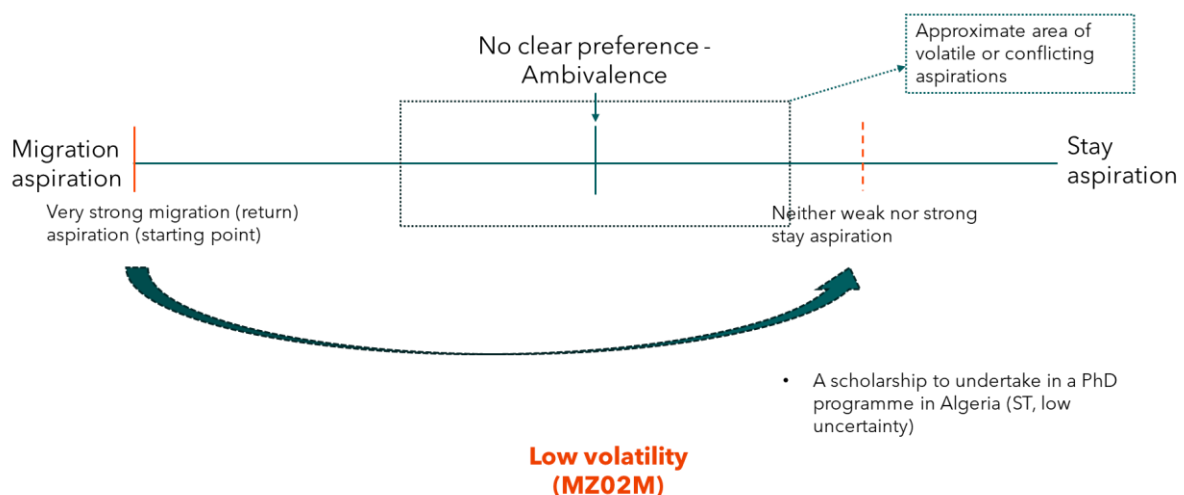
possible but less likely is that he will feel better about his city and his personal life in the city, at least in the short term, leading to a shift to declare preferences to stay. Within the parameters we have elaborated, despite the low chances of actual migration, these migration aspirations have low volatility as we expect him to hold this preference in near to short term. A change of heart leading to the aspiration to stay would be driven by changes in government interventions and more broadly changes in his quality of life.

Case 5

Our last case is a 26-year-old man born in Mauritania (MZ02M) who arrived in Mostaganem, Algeria, in 2022. At the time of the interview, he had just obtained a master's degree and was planning his return to the Mauritanian capital, where he saw more opportunities to find a job than in his region of origin. Before moving to Algeria, he had also moved internally to the North of Mauritania, where he had a brother. To him, international migration was a necessity because there were no master's degrees in which he could enroll in Mauritania. He did not directly choose Algeria. He applied to study programmes in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, he was accepted in Algeria and assigned to Mostaganem by the Algerian Ministry of Education. Nevertheless, after living there and meeting people in Mostaganem, he stated, "I can say now it's my choice too".

His migration project seems to have been carefully planned in advance. He is satisfied with his life in Mostaganem, even though his social life is limited to the university environment and the mosque. He has a strong intention to return now that he has finished his studies. He perceives that he would be unable to achieve his life aspirations in Algeria (finding a job, marrying and having his own business). Despite thinking that life in Mostaganem can be good in the future, he still wants to return, "because I've simply finished studying. That's it, there's nothing else to it." His aspiration to return might be explained by a pre-determined life script and what he and others expected from his migration trajectory in the first place: to get a master's degree and return (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Volatility in spatial mobility of Mauritanian migrant (man) in Mostaganem (Algeria)



Despite this low volatility in spatial aspirations, there is one aspect that would radically shift his migration decision-making: a scholarship or a substantial increase of income: “Well, I wanted to continue up to get a doctorate, but at that time, I couldn't. So, I decided I'm going to work, I'm going to look for a job or other opportunities. After that, Inshallah, we'll see what the future holds.” We assess this participant's migration aspirations to have low volatility. Unlike previous cases, the factors that may make him shift towards staying would be linked to societal changes (scholarship offers), rather than tied to his life course.

7. Analytical insights: Volatility types and mechanisms

This section presents two main insights from the analysis of the twenty-five cases in the sample, drawing back to the concrete examples in the previous section. Our first observation is that there are four types of volatile spatial aspirations which may be more or less visible on the surface. The first type refers to when people express conditional spatial aspirations captured by statements such as, “[I would stay] if prices of things actually come down and erm the people earning the salaries increase by 30 percent, yes” (OR4R). The conditional factor may be more or less plausible resulting in spatial aspirations whose volatility depends on the volatility of the conditions themselves. In this example, migration aspirations have low volatility as a switch to staying depends on the increase in salaries by 30 percent, which is not very likely to happen. However, higher volatility would be present if staying depended on a much simpler target, like getting a better job. **Conditional aspirations** are associated with various degrees of volatility.

Second, volatile spatial aspirations may be associated with **pragmatic ambivalence**, when both staying and migration have good and bad aspects, leading to a momentary choice that may easily change. The 26-year-old woman from Osogbo (OA2R) could see the benefits of staying as well as those of migrating, but expressed weak stay aspirations stating, “I would love to stay, but I don't know.” She did not specify clear reasons why she would go, but she remained open to the idea. Pressure to migrate from her family abroad, finding a husband who is abroad or wishes to migrate or gaining a leadership position in Osogbo could very easily tip the scale towards staying or migrating. The stated spatial aspirations of such ambivalent cases are highly volatile.

The third instance refers to **existential ambivalence** deeply anchored in feelings of distress, estrangement and misalignment between individuals' life aspirations and their lack of ability to achieve them (even if they moved to a different environment). This type of ambivalence is captured by the man in Mostaganem (MZ35R) who expresses dissatisfaction with the community and displays feelings of being stuck and focuses on aspects that are difficult to change, for instance because of his past experience of being in a relatively disadvantaged position. Existential ambivalence can persist or even increase over time. Long processes of self-reflection could lead to a transformation of life priorities and aspirations, ultimately leading to more clarity in spatial aspirations. Cases of existential ambivalence are likely to display low volatility.

The fourth category is composed of all those cases when declared aspirations do not show any conditionality or ambivalence directly attached to them, but the factors used to justify the decision are uncertain and may lead to contextual or personal changes and, in turn, a shift in spatial aspiration. Among the cases analysed we find participants with strong spatial aspiration but, under certain structural or personal circumstances, it is possible to envisage that they would change their stance. These cases may be most difficult to detect as they appear as statements supporting preferences for staying or migrating. However, the narratives suggests that the expressed preference stands on shaky grounds as the factors that justify the preference are rather uncertain. The 26-year-old man from Kebribeyah (KA4R) has very strong migration aspirations, expressing feelings of being stuck and feeling that waiting will not lead to better outcomes, yet he is responsible for his younger siblings, he is against irregular migration and the legal pathways he has in mind – scholarships and labour recruitment – are not very likely. In this case, we suggest that the volatility is low to medium, but still it is reasonable to think that some changes may lead to a shift his aspirations to stay. Our analysis suggests that cases identified with **hidden volatility** tend to have low volatility, but medium and high are also possible. This case illustrates how only in-depth qualitative analyses of these cases enable a more refined assessment of the volatility of this type of spatial aspirations.

Underlying these four types, we identified **three mechanisms** to explain volatility in spatial aspirations. The first mechanism is **maturation**, that is, the emerging or completion of an idea or a project. Here we find the case of the Mauritanian student in Mostaganem (MZ02M) who seemed to be influenced by little else except that he come to study and after completing his degree he was ready to return. While future migration was not out of the question, this specific objective – and the mobility that it entailed – was coming to an end. In our cases, maturation was associated with hidden volatility and conditional aspirations. In all cases, life course factors underpinned spatial aspirations with limited societal factors.

Second, **reconfiguration** linked to changes associated with learning experiences, cumulative events, and transitions over the life course that shape priorities and aspirations over time. This is represented by the case of the young man from Osogbo who has strong migration aspirations that are linked to financial goals beyond stability. When asked about his life aspiration he referred to celebrities and a life of luxury. While it is plausible that this young man's life and spatial aspirations will remain unchanged, it is not unlikely that his priorities may change as he may reassess his options in Nigeria and elsewhere, shifting his spatial aspirations. In our sample, reconfigurations are associated with various types of volatility and primarily life course factors, but also some social transformation factors.

Third, we observe the mechanisms triggered by **tipping points**, which can be described as decisive isolated events that represent a turning point that suddenly shifts spatial aspirations to the opposite direction. Tipping points could be structural or part of the life course. The same young Nigerian man mentioned in the previous example may perceive that decreasing costs of living (structural change), which are a reason influencing his migration aspirations, would allow him to have a better quality of life and make staying more attractive. Decreasing living costs would be a tipping point in this case. At the same time, this same man could find a good well-paying job, giving him the feeling that he is on the path of financial achievements, resulting in a tipping point in his course towards adulthood, resulting in a shift from migration to stay aspiration. As with reconfigurations, all types of volatility

were associated with tipping point. However, there was more balance between life course and social transformation factors underpinning current spatial aspirations.

Although these mechanisms are distinct, they are intertwined, as we just showed with the case of this young man from Osogbo. The same would go for the Mauritanian student in Mostaganem, who in addition to having reached the end of his current migration project, he is also maturing as an individual, while occurrences in Mauritania or in his own life and that of his family may engender tipping points that would influence his spatial aspirations.

Table 4. Spatial aspirations, volatility assessment, volatility type and mechanisms

No.	Country	Case/reference	Spatial Aspiration now	Degree (very weak to very strong)	Volatility (very low to very high)	Factors		Volatility type	Mechanisms		
						ST factors	LC factors		Maturation	Reconfiguration	Tipping point
RESIDENTS											
1	Ethiopia	KF6R	Stay	Very strong	Low volatility		x	Hidden volatility			x
2	Ethiopia	KA4R	Migrate	Very strong	Low to medium volatility		x	Hidden volatility		x	
3	Algeria	M9ZR	Stay	Very strong	Low volatility	x	x	Hidden volatility			x
4	Algeria	MZ35R	Migrate	Very strong	Low volatility	x	x	Existential ambivalence	x	x	
5	Nigeria	OR4R	Migrate	Strong	Medium volatility		x	Conditional aspirations	x	x	
6	Nigeria	OA2R	Stay	Weak	Medium to high volatility		x	Pragmatic ambivalence			x
7	Ethiopia	AL12R	Stay	Very strong	Very high volatility	x	x	Hidden volatility	x		
8	Ethiopia	AZ11R	Migrate	Very strong	Low volatility		x	Hidden volatility	x	x	x
9	Nigeria	AP2R	Stay	Very strong	Very high volatility		x	Conditional aspirations	x		
10	Nigeria	AP12R	Stay	Very strong	Low volatility	x	x	Conditional aspirations			x
11	Algeria	SZ18R	Migrate	Neither weak nor strong	Very low volatility		x	Hidden volatility		x	
12	Algeria	SZ39R	Stay	Very strong	Low volatility	x	x	Hidden volatility			x
MIGRANTS											
13	Ethiopia	KD3M	Migrate	Very strong	Low volatility		x	Hidden volatility	x		
14	Ethiopia	KD10M	Migrate	Very strong	Low volatility	x		Hidden volatility			x
15	Algeria	MZ02M	Return	Very strong	Low volatility		x	Hidden volatility	x		x
16	Algeria	MZ05M	Migrate	Very strong	Medium volatility		x	Hidden volatility	x	x	x
17	Nigeria	OS2M	Return	Very strong	Low volatility		x	Conditional aspirations	x		
18	Nigeria	OA2M	Return	Very strong	No volatility	x		No volatility		x	x
19	Ethiopia	AT6M	Migrate	Strong	Low to medium volatility		x	Hidden volatility		x	x
20	Ethiopia	AT7M	Stay	Neither weak nor strong	Low to medium volatility	x	x	Conditional aspirations	x		x
21	Nigeria	AP2M	Stay	Very strong	Low to medium volatility	x	x	Conditional aspirations		x	x
22	Nigeria	AJ4M	Stay	Very strong	Very high volatility		x	Pragmatic ambivalence			x
23	Algeria	SZ01M	Stay	Strong	Low volatility	x	x	Hidden volatility	x	x	
24	Algeria	SZ05M	Migrate	Very strong	Medium volatility		x	Hidden volatility		x	x
25	Algeria	SZ09M	Return	Don't know	No volatility	x	x	No volatility		x	x

*Data in black reported by participants, in red assessed by researchers.

8. Concluding remarks

This paper has considered the spatial aspirations expressed by twenty-five interview participants, explored the uncertainties underpinning these aspiration and assessed their volatility, namely whether the degree to which these spatial aspirations will shift in the opposite direction. By doing this analysis, this paper aims to contribute to current discussions on the volatility of migration aspirations.

In this paper, we have elaborated plausible individual-based scenarios and drawn insights on the characteristics and circumstances that underpin volatile spatial aspirations. We have identified that, regardless of the stated strength of spatial aspirations declared by participants, the narratives generally reveal more nuanced information that sheds light on why people may shift their aspirations. That said, in most cases, we assess volatility low or low to medium. In fact, only six out of 25 cases were assessed with medium to very high volatility, all with strong or very strong spatial aspirations (half to stay and half to migrate).

This analysis enabled us to identify four types of volatile spatial aspirations – conditional aspirations, pragmatic ambivalence, existential ambivalence, and hidden volatility – and three mechanisms – maturation, reconfiguration and tipping point. No strong associations between degrees of volatility, type of volatility and mechanism have been identified so far. In our sample, hidden volatility is the most common type and tipping point the most common mechanism.

One of the questions we set out to answer was the interplay between structural and life course factors in shaping spatial aspirations and explaining their volatility. What is their respective role then? And are these dynamics different among long-term residents and migrants? The presence of life course and more structural components varied between those who aspired to stay and those who desired to migrate (onwards) or return. Among those who aspired to stay, place had more weight; for instance, they felt closer to the community values and had ambitions to contribute to the community, at times desiring to take on leadership roles. Not surprisingly, those aspiring to migrate tended to feel less connected and embedded in their communities of residence. Conversely, and somewhat surprisingly, no noticeable difference was found between migrants and long-term residents.

Overall, migrants and those aspiring to migrate tended to be more focused on their lives; they felt more uncertain about their future, more negative about the community and its evolution over time and had stronger aspirations to change. Social pressure and relative deprivation were also important factors for them. Points of reference for their comparisons were not only the international migrants from the community, but also internal immigrant investors, social media influencers, and better off members of the community. Among those who expressed the preference to stay, reference groups varied, including people in the community, other cities within the country, people who left as well as people who came to the city and the diaspora.

Although migration norms played a key role in both stay and migration aspirations, ideas about migration were more nuanced among those who aspired to stay. For instance, they assessed more in detail the negative consequences of migrating before marrying, particularly for women (woman in Osogbo) or migrating irregularly (men in Mostaganem and Kebribeyah). Instead, those aspiring to migrate tended to have a more idealistic picture of what could be achieved through migration

(influenced by migration cultures, or ideals of becoming a millionaire (young man in Osobgo). Interestingly, however, despite strong migration aspirations, the openness and willingness to migrate irregularly was very low across the cases. Only two aspiring migrants (out of 6) entertained the idea of irregular migration. All others rejected that option, a fact that greatly constrained their migration possibilities, and, we ask ourselves, may shift their migration aspirations towards staying in the future.

Lastly, the analysis we conducted cannot confirm that individuals who give answers in the middle of the continuum between staying and migrating have the most volatile spatial aspirations (Carling, 2014; Carling & Schewel, 2018), primarily because the sample contains primarily participants with strong or very strong spatial aspiration.⁵ Nevertheless, we found that even those who hold strong and very strong aspirations to stay and migrate may change under certain circumstances, highlighting the cautiousness needed to discern spatial aspirations from survey and through interviews and stressing the need for in-depth analysis of individuals' contextual and personal circumstances over time. Yet, assessing the degree of future volatility is a resource-intensive and subjective process that makes this exercise valuable but difficult to apply on a large scale.

⁵ Out of 243 residents in this research, 200 had strong or very strong spatial aspirations, 34 neither weak nor strong, 7 weak or very weak and 2 indicated they did not know.

References

- Aslany, M., Carling, J., Mjelva, M. B., & Sommerfelt, T. (2021). *Systematic review of determinants of migration aspirations*. University of Southampton.
- Bal, E., & Willems, R. (2014). Introduction: Aspiring migrants, local crises and the imagination of futures 'away from home'. *Identities, 21*(3), 249-258.
- Belloni, M. (2019). Refugees and citizens: Understanding Eritrean refugees' ambivalence towards homeland politics. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 60*(1-2), 55-73.
- Bland, A. R., & Schaefer, A. (2012). Different varieties of uncertainty in human decision-making. *Frontiers in neuroscience, 6*, 85.
- Boccagni, P. (2017). Aspirations and the subjective future of migration: Comparing views and desires of the "time ahead" through the narratives of immigrant domestic workers. *Comparative Migration Studies, 5*(1), 4.
- Boccagni, P., & Kivisto, P. (2019). Introduction: Ambivalence and the social processes of immigrant inclusion. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 60*(1-2), 3-13.
- Bolzman, C. A., & Bridji, S. (2019). Older immigrants living in Switzerland and ambivalence related to return around the retirement period. *International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 60*(1-2), 14-36.
- Carling, J. (2002). Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 28*(1), 5-42.
- Carling, J. (2014). The role of aspirations in migration. *Determinants of International Migration, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, 2325*.
- Carling, J. (2019). Measuring migration aspirations and related concepts. MIGNEX Background Paper. *Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)*.
- Carling, J., & Schewel, K. (2018). Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 44*(6), 945-963.
- Carling, J., & Talleraas, C. (2016). Root causes and drivers of migration. *Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), 2016, 1-44*.
- Chermack, T. J. (2007). Disciplined imagination: Building scenarios and building theories. *Futures, 39*(1), 1-15.
- Chindarkar, N. (2014). Is subjective well-being of concern to potential migrants from Latin America? *Social Indicators Research, 115*(1), 159-182.
- Clark, W. A., & Lisowski, W. (2017). Decisions to move and decisions to stay: Life course events and mobility outcomes. *Housing Studies, 32*(5), 547-565.
- Czaika, M., & Reinprecht, C. (2022). Migration drivers: why do people migrate. *Introduction to Migration Studies: An Interactive Guide to the Literatures on Migration and Diversity, 49-82*.
- Daly, K. (2008). Financial volatility: Issues and measuring techniques. *Physica A: statistical mechanics and its applications, 387*(11), 2377-2393.
- de Haas, H. (2021). A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework. *Comparative Migration Studies, 9*(1), 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>
- de Haas, H., Czaika, M., Flahaux, M.-L., Mahendra, E., Natter, K., Vezzoli, S., & Villares-Varela, M. (2019). International Migration: Trends, Determinants, and Policy Effects. *Population and Development Review, 45*(4), 885-992. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padr.12291>
- De Jong, G. F., & Fawcett, J. (1981). Motivations for Migration: An Assessment and a Value-Expectancy Research Model. In G. F. De Jong & R. W. Gardner (Eds.), *Migration Decision Making: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Microlevel Studies in Developed and Developing Countries* (pp. 394). Pergamon Press.

- Debray, A., Ruysen, I., & Schewel, K. (2022). *Voluntary Immobility: A Global Analysis of Staying Preferences* (176). IMI.
- Debray, A., Ruysen, I., & Schewel, K. (2023). The Aspiration to Stay: A Global Analysis. *International Migration Review*, 01979183231216087.
- Dequech, D. (1999). Expectations and confidence under uncertainty. *Journal of post Keynesian economics*, 21(3), 415-430.
- Dequech, D. (2011). Uncertainty: a typology and refinements of existing concepts. *Journal of economic issues*, 45(3), 621-640.
- Findlay, A., McCollum, D., Coulter, R., & Gayle, V. (2015). New mobilities across the life course: A framework for analysing demographically linked drivers of migration. *Population, space and place*, 21(4), 390-402.
- Hagen-Zanker, J., & Hennessey, G. (2021). What Do We Know about the Subjective and Intangible Factors That Shape Migration Decision-Making?
- Hagen-Zanker, J., Hennessey, G., & Mazzilli, C. (2023). Subjective and intangible factors in migration decision-making: A review of side-lined literature. *Migration Studies*, mnad003.
- Halfacree, K. H., & Boyle, P. J. (1993). The challenge facing migration research: the case for a biographical approach. *Progress in human geography*, 17(3), 333-348.
- Hoppe, A., & Fujishiro, K. (2015). Anticipated job benefits, career aspiration, and generalized self-efficacy as predictors for migration decision-making *International journal of intercultural relations*, 47, 13-27.
- Jolivet, D. (2026). Aspiration Gaps and Ambivalence in Onward Immobilities Within the European Economic Area. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 1-26.
- Jolivet, D. (2020). Post-2008 multi-sited household practices: Between Morocco, Spain and Norway. *International Migration*, 58(1), 45-60.
- Jónsson, G. (2008). Migration aspirations and immobility in a Malian Soninke village.
- Kley, S. (2011). Explaining the stages of migration within a life-course framework. *European Sociological Review*, 27(4), 469-486.
- Kley, S. (2017). Facilitators and constraints at each stage of the migration decision process. *Population studies*, 71(sup1), 35-49.
- Kley, S. A., & Mulder, C. H. (2010). Considering, planning, and realizing migration in early adulthood. The influence of life-course events and perceived opportunities on leaving the city in Germany. *Journal of housing and the built environment*, 25, 73-94.
- Merton, R. K., & Barber, E. (1963). Sociological ambivalence. In E. A. Tiryakian (Ed.), *Sociological Theory, Values and Sociocultural Change: Essays in Honor of Pitirim A. Sorokin*, (pp. 91–120). Free Press of Glencoe.
- Migali, S., & Scipioni, M. (2018). A global analysis of intentions to migrate. *European Commission*.
- Migali, S., & Scipioni, M. (2019). Who's about to leave? A global survey of aspirations and intentions to migrate. *International Migration*, 57(5), 181-200.
- Mo, C. H. (2018). Perceived relative deprivation and risk: An aspiration-based model of human trafficking vulnerability. *Political Behavior*, 40(1), 247-277.
- Pécoud, A., & F. Savatic. (2026). Preaching to the Choir: The Impact of Restrictive Migration Policies and Information Campaigns on Aspirations to Migrate. IMI Working Paper No. 191/PACES Working Paper.
- No.10. Paris: Université Sorbonne Paris Nord. Rodriguez-Pena, N. (2024). The strength of migration and stay aspirations: understanding harmonious, conflicting and indeterminate aspirations. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 12(1), 42.
- Rudolph, L., Koubi, V., & Freihardt, J. (2025). Environmental change and migration aspirations: Evidence from Bangladesh. *Global Environmental Change*, 91, 102966. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2025.102966>

- Runciman, W. G. (1966). *Relative deprivation and social justice: A study of attitudes to social inequality in twentieth-century England* (Vol. 13). Routledge/Thoemms Press.
- Schewel, K. (2015). *Understanding the Aspiration to Stay: A Case Study of Young Adults in Senegal* (107). IMI.
- Schewel, K. (2020). Understanding immobility: Moving beyond the mobility bias in migration studies. *International Migration Review*, 54(2), 328-355.
- Schewel, K., & Fransen, S. (2018). Formal education and migration aspirations in Ethiopia. *Population and Development Review*, 44(3), 555.
- Schewel, K., & Fransen, S. (2022). Who prefers to stay? voluntary immobility among youth in Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 48(19), 4457-4484.
- Smith, H. J., & Huo, Y. J. (2014). Relative deprivation: How subjective experiences of inequality influence social behavior and health. *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 1(1), 231-238.
- Stark, O. (1984). Rural-to-urban migration in LDCs: a relative deprivation approach. *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 32(3), 475-486.
- Stark, O., & Yitzhaki, S. (1988). Labour migration as a response to relative deprivation. *Journal of Population Economics*, 1(1), 57-70. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00171510>
- Vezzoli, S. (2023). Understanding aspirations to stay: Relative endowment within a time–space perspective. *Migration Studies*, 11(2), 259-285.
- Vezzoli, S. (2022). *Migration aspirations and preferences to stay in a Brazilian frontier town: tranquility, hope and relative endowment* (IMI WP 174; MADE Paper 21). International Migration Institute, University of Amsterdam.
- Vezzoli, S., Bonfiglio, A., & de Haas, H. (2017). *Global migration futures: Exploring the future of international migration with a scenario methodology* (IMI WP 135). International Migration Institute, University of Amsterdam.
- Vezzoli, S., Mýtna Kureková L., Schewel, K. (2024). Researching decisions to stay and migrate: A Temporal Multilevel Analysis framework. IMI Working Paper No. 178/PACES Project Working Paper No. 1. Den Haag: ISS.
- Walker, W. E., Harremoës, P., Rotmans, J., Van Der Sluijs, J. P., Van Asselt, M. B., Janssen, P., & Krayen von Krauss, M. P. (2003). Defining uncertainty: a conceptual basis for uncertainty management in model-based decision support. *Integrated assessment*, 4(1), 5-17.
-

Annex

Table A1 – Research locations and interviews⁶

Country	Location	Description	Interviews
Algeria	Mostaganem	Relatively small city on the Mediterranean coast in the northwest of Algeria with a fishing industry and growing tourism.	40 residents, 10 migrants
Algeria	Sétif	A major industrial and commercial hub in the northeast of Algeria, roughly 75km inland from the Mediterranean.	40 residents, 10 migrants
Ethiopia	Adama	A rapidly growing city located roughly 100km southeast from the capital, Addis Ababa.	40 residents, 11 migrants
Ethiopia	Kebribeyah	Small town in the Somali region of Ethiopia, near the border with Somalia.	38 residents, 12 migrants
Nigeria	Abuja	The capital city of Nigeria, located in the middle of the country, is rapidly expanding both in terms of population and infrastructural developments.	43 residents, 10 migrants
Nigeria	Osogbo	A relatively small city in the southwestern part of the country, roughly 200km northeast of Lagos, that is primarily known for its cultural heritage.	42 residents, 10 migrants

⁶ Table adapted from Pécoud and Savatic (2026).