Ayuda en Acción

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Immobility in Fragile Contexts: Between Dignity, Rootedness, and Migration

A Comparative Study in Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa

A report by Ayuda en Acción and the IDRC Research Chair on Migration and Forced Displacement at the Universidad del Pacífico

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1.
Introduction

1.1. Rethinking Immobility: Policy Relevance and New Directions

Across the globe, migration continues to dominate public policy, media narratives, and development programming. Yet despite this sustained focus on mobility, most people—indeed, the overwhelming majority—do not move. Even in contexts of profound disruption, whether through conflict, climate shocks, or economic instability, people overwhelmingly stay. They remain in rural areas despite drought. They endure in urban peripheries marked by violence. They navigate daily life in post-conflict zones or transit corridors, not because they are unaware of alternatives, but because those alternatives are inaccessible, undesirable, or incompatible with their responsibilities.

Still, immobility remains a policy blind spot. The emphasis on movement—on people in transit, at borders, or in camps—has crowded out a crucial question: Why do people stay despite clear risks and adversity? Those who do not migrate are often treated as a residual category, implicitly defined by the absence of action. Yet staying, as this study reveals, is rarely passive. It is shaped by layers of meaning: care obligations, place-attachment, generational legacy, legal exclusion, trauma, and deep skepticism toward migration systems that have failed before.

This study takes that question—why people stay—as its point of departure. It examines immobility not as a leftover category but as a rich social phenomenon, deeply entangled with aspiration, constraint, identity, and risk

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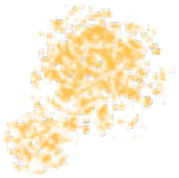

attention and programmatic response as movement. Drawing on an integrated framework of aspirations and capabilities, the report shows that immobility arises not only from external barriers, but also from internal decisions rooted in love, duty, fear, and strategy.

Critically, we reframe immobility as a development condition—one that intersects with systems of inequality, but also with strategies of resilience. We argue that the ability to stay safely and with dignity should be recognized not as a failure to migrate, but as a fundamental freedom. For communities facing deep uncertainty, staying can be an act of endurance, ingenuity, or care. But it must also be an option that is supported—not merely survived.

This multi-country study was designed to capture the complexity of staying in contexts where movement is often assumed or expected. Carried out in Africa (Ethiopia and Mali) and Latin America (Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico) from October 2024 to April 2025, the study was funded by Ayuda en Acción, the Peru IDRC Research Chair on Migration and Forced Displacement at the Universidad del Pacífico, and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and supported by key academic partners in Africa and Latin America.

These five countries represent diverse configurations of risk, governance, and mobility regimes. They include sites of internal displacement, cross-border migration, climate exposure, and layered forms of immobility—from urban dwellers in Mexico stuck in transit to rural Ethiopians caring for elderly relatives after failed migration attempts. Each country's case offered a unique lens through which to examine how people navigate the decision—or the inability—to stay.

To understand immobility as both structure and experience, we employed a sequenced multi-method design:

- Focus groups in each country helped identify local definitions and lived categories of immobility, grounding the research in community-specific realities.
- Household surveys with 350 - 420 participants per country provided standardized comparative data on migration aspirations, capabilities, and household conditions.
- Latent Class Analysis (LCA) was used to identify statistically distinct immobility profiles based on aspirations, characteristics, capabilities, and external constraints.
- In-depth interviews, purposefully selected based on the profiles identified in the household survey, enriched the quantitative data by revealing how people interpret their immobility—not only in terms of what they cannot do, but also what they choose, endure, or envision.

This combination allowed us to go beyond static categories and ask more probing questions: What does it mean to stay when others leave? How do people describe staying—as sacrifice, strategy, resistance, or silence? What does it cost, emotionally and materially, to remain in place when systems

fail, when violence lingers, or when migration seems like the only path to change?

Our goal is to provide policymakers, donors, and practitioners with a deeper understanding of how people perceive staying—whether as choice, necessity, or some blend of both—and how aspirations interact with constraint. The findings speak directly to three communities of practice:

- Humanitarian actors, who often miss those most vulnerable because they do not migrate;
- Organizations, and who must support capabilities for in-place resilience;
- Climate adaptation and migration governance agents, who too often treat mobility as the only response to stress.

Rather than position immobility as the inverse or failure of migration, we frame it as a core element of the mobility continuum. It intersects with conflict, caregiving, gender, governance, and environment in powerful ways. And it reveals how people build meaning and navigate risk, even when movement seems unlikely or impossible.

This insight cuts across contexts where humanitarian and development logics often diverge. In parts of Africa, for example, immobility is frequently approached as a humanitarian challenge, marked by crisis, displacement, and survival. In Latin America, by contrast, staying is more commonly addressed through development interventions focused on opportunity, rights, and inclusion. Yet this study shows that the boundaries between these spheres are blurred: whether shaped by drought or deportation, caregiving or exclusion, immobility demands responses that bridge emergency relief, long-term investment, and the non-negotiable work of sustaining peace in fragile communities.

For organizations whose programs straddle this humanitarian–development–peace nexus, the challenge is not simply to deliver aid, but to recognize and reinforce the capabilities that allow people to stay with dignity.

This report does not advocate for migration prevention. Mobility is often essential: a survival strategy, a pathway for development, a right, and an act of agency. But too often, programs assume movement by default—while those who remain are unseen, unsupported, or misread. This study offers a different starting point: people stay and go for complex reasons. Programs and policies should be judged not by whether they promote staying or going, but by whether they expand or constrain freedom.

Ultimately, the question is not whether people should stay or go. It is whether individuals, their households, and their communities have the freedom to shape their aspirations—and the capabilities to act on them with dignity, wherever they lead.

1.2. Research Objectives and Rationale

1.2.1. Why Study Immobility?

Global debates about migration are often shaped by narratives of velocity and volume: Who is moving, how many, and to where. Reports focus on border crossings, refugee flows, and the geopolitical consequences of migration and displacement. Yet these discussions mask a deeper demographic reality—the vast majority of people do not migrate. Only 3.6 percent of the world's population are international migrants[1]. For every person who crosses a border, many more remain—willingly or not.

Despite this, immobility remains underexplored, conceptually and programmatically. It is often treated as the absence of movement rather than a condition in its own right—a silence in the migration story. Development strategies, humanitarian plans, and policy frameworks have focused on enabling or managing movement, without asking why people stay, what it means to stay, or what kinds of support is needed for those who do.

Yet staying is never neutral. It reflects decisions, negotiations, and constraints, often shaped by gendered care roles, legal exclusion, household dynamics, climate pressures, conflict exposure, or repeated migration failure. Some stay out of deep attachment to place. Others stay because they lack the financial, legal, social, or psychological capabilities to pursue alternatives. Still others oscillate between planning to move and deciding to wait, caught in cycles of responsibility, uncertainty, or hope.

Ignoring immobility leads to misdiagnosed needs. Policies may overinvest in preparing people to migrate and underinvest in those left behind. They may overlook how staying under strain can deepen gender and generational inequalities, as well as violence and persecution, or how immobility reflects not indifference, but adaptation, compromise, or resistance. A new perspective is needed—one that recognizes immobility not as absence of movement, but as a complex, situated condition shaped by decisions, constraints, and responsibilities.

1.2.2. Objectives of the Global Study on Immobility

This five-country comparative study was designed to fill this gap: to better understand who stays, why they stay, and what it means for development, protection, and policy. It pursued three core objectives:

To identify the determinants and enabling conditions of immobility. Through both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study mapped how aspirations and capabilities interact to shape different forms of staying. It distinguished between voluntary and involuntary immobility, care-bound constraint, trauma-induced stasis, and acquiescent adaptation. These patterns were further analyzed by gender, life stage, family roles, displacement histories, and levels of institutional trust.

To generate evidence that informs program and policy design. This study does not advocate staying over moving, nor does it suggest that remaining in place is inherently desira-

1. International Organization for Migration. World Migration Report 2024. Geneva: IOM, 2024. https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/

ble. Instead, it supports place-based strategies that: (a) Reduce the risks of staying by necessity; (b) Strengthen the conditions for staying by choice; and (c) Expand people's supported freedom to act on their aspirations—whether to stay or move.

To reposition immobility as a first-order concern in mobility governance. By focusing on people who stay despite adversity—whether in conflict zones, urban peripheries, or climate-fragile areas—the study invites a shift in how immobility is framed. It argues that staying must be at the center of conversations about resilience, inclusion, and human development, particularly in settings where migration is neither safe, accessible, nor desirable.

1.2.3. Why This Matters for Development and Humanitarian Actors

Across the five countries, people navigate intersecting pressures: poverty, exclusion, climate volatility, caregiving obligations, weak institutions, and the long shadow of violence or migration failure. These forces do not affect everyone equally, nor do they always result in movement. In many cases, they lead people to stay—sometimes deliberately, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes with no real alternative.

Those who remain are often those least visible in policy frameworks.:

- Caregivers, often women, who delay or forego migration due to household responsibilities;
- Elders and returnees with limited means or legal options to move again;
- Youth constrained by family dynamics or social expectations;
- People in legal limbo, unable to regularize their status or plan their futures;
- Individuals whose trust in migration, legal, or economic systems has eroded.

They are not passive, nor simply "left behind." They navigate constraints actively, assess trade-offs, and make hard decisions in context. But because they do not move, they are frequently overlooked by migration-focused programs, displaced in policy classifications, or invisible in data systems that fail to capture agency in the absence of movement.

For governments, donors, and civil society actors—particularly those working across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus—understanding immobility is essential to:

- Reach vulnerable populations who are unlikely to migrate, even in crisis;
- Design in-situ adaptation strategies in areas affected by climate or livelihood stress;
- Support families fragmented by migration, especially when women, children, or elders are immobilized while others leave;
- Enhance social protection and resilience in regions where people stay not because they can, but because they must.

This study is therefore not just about migration. It is about the freedom to choose whether to stay or go—and about the responsibility to build policies and systems that recognize, protect, and support the full spectrum of that choice.

This study adopts a conceptual framework that creates space for that complexity. Building on the aspirations–capabilities model, it understands immobility not merely as movement or stasis

1.3. Conceptual Framework: Aspirations, Capabilities, and the Meanings of Staying

To understand immobility, we must first reframe how we think about movement itself. Migration research has long focused on the drivers of mobility—what pushes people to leave, what pulls them elsewhere, and what happens along the way. But this movement-centered lens, while essential, often obscures a quieter reality: most people stay. Even in places marked by instability, exclusion, or violence, remaining in place is common. In some cases, it is a deliberate decision, while in others, it is imposed. Yet this act—whether chosen or forced—is rarely examined with the same nuance or urgency.

What's missing is not just data, but language. Staying is too often equated with inertia, as if those who remain are merely stuck, left behind, or resigned to their fate. In truth, the choice to stay—like the choice to leave—is rarely simple. It is shaped by desire, obligation, structure, timing, and care. It is lived through the body, negotiated within households, and woven into the daily rhythms of life.

This study adopts a conceptual framework that creates space for that complexity. Building on the aspirations–capabilities model, it understands immobility not merely as movement or stasis, but as the interaction between two evolving dimensions: what people hope for, and what they are able to pursue[2].

At one end of the spectrum are those who aspire to migrate and are capable of doing so—the movers, whose intent aligns with opportunity. At the opposite end are tho-

2. The aspirations-capabilities framework is based on a series of works, including Jørgen Carling, "Migration in the Age of Involuntary Immobility: Theoretical Reflections and Cape Verdean Experiences," Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 28, no. 1 (2002): 5-42; Hein de Haas, Migration Theory: Quo Vadis?, International Migration Institute Working Paper No. 100 (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2014); Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel, "Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration," Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 44, no. 6 (2018): 945-963; Kerilyn Schewel, "Understanding Immobility: Moving beyond the Mobility Bias in Migration Studies," International Migration Review 54, no. 2 (2020): 328-355; and Hein de Haas, "A Theory of Migration: The Aspirations-Capabilities Framework," Comparative Migration Studies 9, no. 1 (2021): 1-35.

se who neither want to move nor have the means to do so: the acquiescent stayers, whose immobility reflects resignation, routine, or adaptation. Between these poles lie more textured realities: people who wish to leave but cannot, and people who could leave but choose to stay. These are not fixed identities. They shift across time, life stage, and circumstance—shaped by external change and internal recalibration.

One of the central insights of this framework is that aspirations and capabilities are not binary. They are conditional, partial, and constantly negotiated. A young man in Mali may aspire to migrate—but not yet; he's waiting until the harvest is in, or until his sister marries. A mother in Ecuador may have the means to leave, but not the moral permission—she is the sole caregiver for a parent in declining health. A returnee in Ethiopia may no longer dream of moving, not because she feels at home, but because trauma has narrowed her sense of what is possible.

Aspirations are deeply relational. They are shaped by what people see, what they hear, and how they interpret the lives of others—whether across the street or across borders. They are gendered, generational, and entangled with care. Many respondents expressed a desire to migrate, but only under specific conditions: after the children finish school; once debts are repaid; if a sibling can take over household duties. Others spoke of muted or suspended aspirations—hopes quieted by fatigue, failure, or persistent uncertainty.

Capabilities, too, go far beyond income or paperwork. They include access to networks, legal status, health, safety, psychological confidence, and the internal sense that action is possible. In Mexico and Colombia, legal invisibility sharply limited people's ability to move. In Mali, insecurity and geography constrained even those who had financial means. In Ethiopia, gendered expectations dictated who could imagine leaving—and who was expected to stay.

Together, these dimensions form a decision space shaped by the interplay of structure and subjectivity. The framework helps explain why some stay with pride, others with sorrow, and many somewhere in between. It also captures the coexistence of different mobility positions within the same household—for example, when men migrate while women remain, or when youth delay movement to fulfill care responsibilities.

This aspirations-capabilities approach was not just a theoretical frame; it guided the research design itself. Household surveys and Latent Class Analysis were built around indicators of aspiration, capacity, and constraint. Focus groups and interviews explored the meanings people attach to staying, and the tensions they experience between desire and possibility. Findings were organized not only by geography or demography, but by where people situated themselves along this multidimensional spectrum.

The typology that emerged captures the richness of these experiences. Each profile, from Strategic Aspirants who wait for the right moment, to Care-Entrenched Stayers whose immobility is shaped by interdependence, to Trauma-Driven Stayees whose plans are blocked by fear or failure, reflects a distinct configuration of agency and limitation. Some

forms of staying are hopeful. Others are weary. Most lie in between.

Ultimately, this framework is a listening tool. It helps us hear more fully what people are saying—not just whether they want to migrate, but what staying means, what holds them back, and what might make them feel secure, seen, and supported. It offers not just a language for describing immobility, but a structure for understanding it—and for acting in response.

One of the central insights of this framework is that aspirations and capabilities are not binary. They are conditional, partial, and constantly negotiated

1.4. Study Design, Methodological Approach, and Case Selection

Understanding immobility requires more than asking why people do not move. It calls for listening to how people make sense of their lives—what they hope for, what they fear, and what conditions they negotiate every day. To do that, this study was designed not as a static snapshot but as a layered, sequential, mixed-methods inquiry: combining statistics with stories, patterns with perspective, and cross-country comparison with local grounding.

Across five countries in Africa (Ethiopia and Mali) and Latin America (Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico) research teams followed a shared framework but adapted their approach to local realities. This structure allowed us to trace commonalities across vastly different regions while respecting the institutional, cultural, and environmental contours of each place. We asked not only who stays and why, but what staying feels like - and what it costs materially, socially, and emotionally.

Given the exploratory nature of the study, the goal was not to produce nationally representative statistics. Instead, we sought locally grounded contrasts to better understand the varied meanings of staying as they emerge through the kaleidoscopic interplay of aspirations and capabilities in high-risk communities.

1.4.1. From Categories to Lives: A Multi-Step Design

The research unfolded in five interconnected steps, each building on the last—allowing us to move from broad patterns to intimate understandings of how immobility is lived, narrated, and interpreted. (See Annex: Methodology for further detail.)

1.4.1.1. Focus Groups: Surfacing Local Realities

We began with focus group discussions—two to four per country—with diverse participants from long-settled, displaced, and disrupted populations. These conversations validated factors identified in the literature and anchored the research in local concepts and language. Participants shared how they define staying or feeling stuck, and how care, safety, and obligation shape everyday decisions.

In Ecuador, people described migration as an interruption of family and care. In Ethiopia, returnees voiced both relief and resignation. In Mexico, migrants in legal limbo described emotional and juridical immobilization, despite technically being "in transit." These insights directly shaped the design of our survey instruments to reflect lived experience, not just academic categories.

1.4.1.2. Household Surveys: Capturing Scale

Based on these insights, we conducted household surveys in each country, reaching between 350 and 420 respondents per site. Sampling focused on areas where mobility is deeply contested—urban peripheries, border zones, conflict-affected regions, and areas of climate exposure.

The survey covered three domains:

- Aspirations and migration history: whether respondents wanted to move, had tried to, or had migrated before.
- Household structure and roles: who makes decisions, provides care, and shares responsibilities—factors central to both aspiration and capacity.
- Constraints and enablers: income, access to services, legal status, security, and shocks—elements that shape what people can do, not just what they want.

In each country, we included two analytically distinct groups: long-settled or local populations and individuals with disrupted mobility histories—displaced persons, returnees, or migrants stranded mid-journey. This allowed comparison of how legal status, displacement, and institutional access influence both the desire and the ability to move.

1.4.1.3. Latent Class Analysis (LCA): Identifying Patterns

Using the survey data, we conducted a Latent Class Analysis—a statistical technique that identifies distinct groups based on shared characteristics. Here, we focused on variables related to migration aspiration and behavior, layered with demographic and household information. The goal was not to oversimplify but to uncover recurring profiles: youth who want to move but cannot; caregivers who postpone their own plans; returnees re-evaluating next steps; individuals whose aspirations have faded over time.

These profiles weren't just statistical outputs—they became the backbone of our comparative analysis. They helped us see who is choosing to stay, who feels trapped, who is holding on to dreams, and who is quietly adapting.

1.4.1.4. In-Depth Interviews: Going Deeper

Numbers alone cannot explain why people stay. So in each country, teams conducted 22 to 40 in-depth interviews with people representing different segments identified in the LCA. These conversations brought the data to life.

A woman in Cauca, Colombia described caring for a disabled sibling as central to her identity. A youth in Otavalo, Ecuador delayed migration out of duty to family. A returnee in Afar, Ethiopia spoke of fear and disillusionment clouding his sense of possibility. These stories revealed the emotional and moral logic of staying—not just its logistical or structural constraints, but the values, hopes, and hesitations that structure immobility.

1.4.1.5. Connecting the Dots: Integrated Comparative Analysis

Finally, the research team synthesized findings across all methods. Statistical profiles were analyzed alongside interview transcripts to trace how aspiration and capability interact in practice—not in theory. We analyzed how these patterns varied by gender, life stage, caregiving roles, displacement histories, and perceived safety. We examined how migration histories influenced current intentions, and how family configurations shaped what was feasible—or permitted.

This integrated analysis generated a typology of immobility that reflects grounded realities—not just ideal types, but the textured, shifting conditions under which people stay.

1.4.2. Why These Countries? What They Reveal Together

The five countries in this study were not selected at random. Each was chosen to reflect a distinct configuration of migration regimes, risk landscapes, and governance contexts—and all are settings where Ayuda en Acción is directly engaged. Together, they move across a spectrum of immobility conditions: from structurally constrained environments marked by climate stress and insecurity, to relational and institutional forms of constraint, to urban immobility shaped by policy limbo and bureaucratic exclusion.

- Mali offers insight into the breakdown of traditional mobility systems under the pressure of armed conflict, environmental degradation, and gendered expectations. In regions like Ségou, once defined by cyclical migration, people now face blocked routes, violence, and eroding livelihoods. Drought and desertification have disrupted farming and herding, leaving many residents—especially women and older adults—anchored in place as mobility becomes less viable.

- Ethiopia captures how post-conflict disruption, climate shocks, and social norms converge to reshape mobility in Afar. Returnees and host communities grapple with trauma, failed migration attempts, and the erosion of pastoral livelihoods. For many, especially women, staying reflects both obligation and fear: a fragile coping strategy in the face of insecurity, displacement, and shifting gender roles.

- Colombia highlights immobility in a con-

text of long-term displacement, institutional distrust, and fractured household dynamics. In both urban and rural zones, people stay to care for children, elders, or returnees amid persistent insecurity and weak state presence. Immobility here is often involuntary, yet sustained by moral commitment and emotional anchoring within households still recovering from past violence.

- Ecuador reveals how immobility is shaped by caregiving roles, exclusion, and fear of violence, both among Ecuadorians and displaced Colombians and Venezuelans living in high-risk urban and peri-urban zones. Climate-related disruptions—such as power outages from drought and flooding—further destabilize household resilience. For many, staying is a deferred aspiration or a constrained tactic, negotiated within families navigating fragmented systems of support.

- Mexico reflects a distinct pattern of urban immobility shaped by policy barriers and legal uncertainty. In Mexico City, migrants and returnees remain in place not because they feel rooted, but because they are trapped by bureaucratic delays, fear of detention, and lack of viable options. Immobility here is liminal and institutional—less about attachment, more about stalled mobility in a context of exclusion.

Taken together, these countries demonstrate that immobility is not a singular condition. It is experienced through different registers—care and crisis, fear and strategy, attachment and abandonment. Each case - from Mali to Mexico - expands how we understand what it means to stay, and what it takes to do so with dignity.

1.5. Country-Level Findings

This study explored immobility across five diverse country contexts—Mali, Ethiopia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico—each marked by distinctive histories, geographies, and migration systems. While the drivers of immobility vary, all five cases highlight the ways that constraint and commitment interact with gender, care, conflict, and capability to shape the meaning and experience of staying.

1.5.1. Mali

In Mali, immobility is the product of interrupted traditions, worsening environmental conditions, and the breakdown of customary systems. In Ségou, a region historically shaped by mobility, insecurity and drought have severed seasonal movement routes and deepened uncertainty. For older adults and women, staying often reflects duty—to hold the household together or care for others amid rising tension and displacement. Young men increasingly describe themselves as a "generation-in-waiting," unable to enact the migration paths that defined previous life stages. Immobility in Mali is not simply about absence of movement—it reflects the exhaustion of viable options and the slow constriction of imagined futures.

1.5.2. Ethiopia

In Ethiopia's Afar Region, immobility reflects the combined effects of displacement, disrup-

ted pastoral livelihoods, and gendered social norms. In Chifra and Ewa, years of drought, conflict, and failed migration have reshaped expectations around mobility. Pastoral strategies are no longer viable for many, and agropastoral households have been pushed into sedentarism. Women and girls often remain to care for others while men pursue increasingly uncertain migration. Across the three segments identified, immobility spans resignation, responsibility, and disillusionment. Staying is rarely voluntary—it is more often an adaptive response to limited choice, trauma, and the erosion of viable exit strategies.

1.5.3. Colombia

In Colombia, immobility is shaped by displacement legacies, institutional distrust, and caregiving roles deeply embedded in family structures. In both Cauca and Cali, individuals remain not because they feel secure, but because they are tethered—by trauma, by dependents, or by the fear of repeating failed migration attempts. Across the three segments identified, staying is variously motivated by past return experiences, anchored caregiving responsibilities, and modest satisfaction with current conditions. Climate factors such as flooding and water scarcity exacerbate vulnerability but rarely act as primary triggers. Instead, immobility reflects layered constraint—emotional, economic, and social—and is often sustained by those who feel they must hold together what migration has fractured.

1.5.4. Ecuador

In Ecuador, immobility is driven by intersecting pressures—care, violence, discrimination, and climate stress—within both Ecuadorian and displaced Colombian and Venezuelan households. In Ibarra and Otavalo, respondents report feeling stuck due to household caregiving duties, fear of violence in destination areas, and exclusion from formal systems. Drought-linked power outages, flooding, and poor housing conditions further erode mobility options, particularly for low-income women. Many stay not by choice but by necessity, caught between family obligations and the risks of moving. Yet aspirations persist, as staying often feels temporary, strategic, or morally bound, especially in households where mobility remains aspirational but out of reach.

1.5.5. Mexico

In Mexico City, immobility among both nationals and migrants is shaped by legal precarity, bureaucratic barriers, and fragmented urban support systems. Migrants in transit—especially from Central America and Venezuela—are immobilized by fear, lack of documentation, and the threat of detention. Mexican nationals experience immobility through forced return or circular migration that ultimately ends in stagnation.

Unlike rural areas where immobility is tied to land or tradition, urban immobility here is marked by liminality: people are not fully settled, but cannot move on. Policy frameworks often fail to register these populations, rendering the needs deriving from their immobility invisible in both humanitarian and development programming.

1.6. Comparative Insights

Though the forms and meanings of immobility vary across Africa (Mali, Ethiopia) and Latin America (Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico), a set of shared patterns emerges. These insights show how aspiration and capability interact with care, constraint, and context—not as binaries, but as shifting configurations across space, gender, age, and history. This comparative synthesis draws directly from typologies developed in each country and anticipates the programmatic and policy relevance explored in later chapters.

1.6.1. Staying Is Negotiated, Not Decided

Across all five countries, immobility rarely reflects a single decision. People describe staying as the outcome of negotiation—with others in the household, with systems, and with themselves. In Mali and Ethiopia, migration often follows a generational queue; in Colombia and Ecuador, caregiving stretches intentions across years. Immobility is not static: it reflects postponed plans, family needs, and recalibrated expectations. Even when people say "I am staying," they often mean "for now."

1.6.2. Age and Life Stage Reframe Aspiration

Younger people consistently express stronger desires to migrate—seeking work, independence, or transformation. But they also face the steepest constraints: legal, financial, and familial. Older adults, in contrast, often frame staying as a form of stewardship or reconciliation. In contexts like Colombia and Mali, returnees describe immobility not as failure, but as restoration. This shift—from aspiration to rootedness—suggests that age and household role mediate both capacity and meaning.

Across all five countries, immobility rarely reflects a single decision. People describe staying as the outcome of negotiation—with others in the household, with systems, and with themselves

1.6.3. Gender and Care Economies Structure Immobility

Immobility is deeply gendered—but not uniformly. Women across Ethiopia, Ecuador, and Colombia often stay to care, anchoring family systems. Men in Mali and Ethiopia, by contrast, express frustration at being unable to fulfill expected roles through migration. Yet this division is not fixed. In Mexico, caregiving men and strategic women challenge traditional roles. What is consistent is this:

Though the forms and meanings of immobility vary across Africa (Mali, Ethiopia) and Latin America (Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico), a set of shared patterns emerges

across all contexts, women disproportionately absorb the costs of staying—in time, visibility, and structural support.

In Colombia and Ecuador, many women postpone or forgo migration to raise children, manage schooling, or provide long-term care to sick or aging relatives. These decisions are not passive. They reflect moral responsibility and strategic sacrifice. Yet they often come without state support or social recognition. Women find themselves cast as the emotional and logistical backbone of the household—central, but unacknowledged. Their immobility is not always involuntary, but it is often undercompensated.

In contrast, men in Mali and Ethiopia describe immobility in terms of blocked provision. When unable to migrate, they feel they have failed to meet expectations of masculinity rooted in labor and remittance. This dynamic can produce frustration, shame, and even identity crisis. However, in Mexico, roles begin to blur: deported men take on care responsibilities, while women increasingly engage in migration planning. These shifts show that gendered immobility is not static—it is responsive to household need, institutional failure, and shifting norms.

1.6.4. Trauma and Failed Migration Alter the Horizon

Across Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mexico, many people who stay have migrated before. Some have returned after deportation, others after disappointment or trauma. For them, staying is a shield—against risk, revictimization, or stigma. But it is also a quiet rupture: a recalibration of what is possible. Past mobility narrows future imagination. Aspirations do not disappear, but they dim, displaced by fatigue, debt, or fear of trying again.

1.6.5. Institutional Absence Reinforces Involuntary Staying

Whether in Mexico City or rural Ségou, respondents consistently cite weak or absent institutions as barriers to movement and reintegration. In Mali and Colombia, people feel abandoned by state services. In Ecuador and Mexico, legal precarity blocks formal mobility. In Ethiopia, land and service access remain unreliable after conflict. Immobility thrives not only where migration is difficult, but where staying is unsupported.

1.6.6. Immobility Is Meaningful, Even When Marginalized

The final insight is perhaps the most impor-

tant: staying is not the absence of ambition. For some, it is resistance. For others, it is responsibility. And for many, it is simply what is left when other options collapse. People invest in staying—in land, children, ritual, and routine. But they do so quietly, often without policy recognition or narrative support. The dignity of staying remains under-acknowledged, despite its prevalence.

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These comparative insights show that immobility is not a single condition but a spectrum of experience—structured by gender, care, risk, aspiration, and the quiet force of constraint. The chapters that follow are organized in three parts. First, we present five country studies, each offering a typology of immobility grounded in survey data and life stories. Second, we synthesize shared patterns and structural drivers across contexts. Finally, we turn to action: identifying program and policy responses that support those who stay—not to prevent migration, but to make staying a viable, safe, and supported choice. These recommendations do not offer a universal fix. They respond to different profiles of immobility and aim to bridge the humanitarian–development–peace divide with strategies that are as layered and grounded as the people they are meant to reach.

2.
Mali: Immobility in the Western Sahel

2.1. Introduction

2.1.1. Mali Immobility Context

Mali is a country shaped by movement, both voluntary and involuntary. From Soninke migration circuits in Kayes to gold miners in Gao and students seeking opportunity in France, voluntary migration has long served as a pathway to economic improvement for workers and a source of remittances for families and communities. However, the combined pressures of armed conflict, poverty, political instability, and intercommunal tensions have also turned Mali into a scene of forced displacement. According to the IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix, there were nearly 392,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Mali as of April 2023, primarily located in Mopti, Timbuktu, Bandiagara, Menaka, Gao, and Ségou[1].

Overlaying this situation is the growing burden of climate disruption. In a country already dependent on seasonal rainfall and subsistence agriculture, shifting weather patterns, irregular rains, and intensifying droughts and floods have placed communities under strain. Livelihoods such as transhumant pastoralism—an ancestral practice vital to Mali's economy—are increasingly disrupted, leading to competition over natural resources, blocked mobility corridors, and escalating tensions between farmers and herders.

Mali is a departure country for its nationals, a transit country due to its geographical location, and a destination country for immigrants. The regions of Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso, and Gao have a long tradition of emigration, with Kayes being the primary source of Malian emigrants. Ivory Coast is the top destination for Malian emigrants, followed by Ghana and Niger. In Europe, France and Spain are the main destinations; in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, and Libya host most Malian emigrants[2].

The Gao region is an important crossing point for migrants from sub-Saharan Africa in transit towards North Africa, the Maghreb, and eventually Europe[3]. Mali also hosts immigrants from neighboring countries like Burkina Faso, Guinea Conakry,

1. International Organization for Migration. Mali —Rapport sur les mouvements de populations, Septembre 2023. Bamako: IOM, 2023. https://dtm.iom.int/fr/reports/mali-rapport-sur-les-mouvements-de-populations-septembre-2023

2. International Organization for Migration. Mali —Suivi des flux et présence de migrants au Mali, Janvier - Décembre 2022. Bamako: IOM, 2023.https://dtm.iom.int/fr/reports/mali-suivi-des-flux-et-presence-de-migrants-au-mali-janvier-decembre-2022

3. Ibid.

and Niger, and from non-African countries, notably Asians involved in petroleum, gas, and infrastructure sectors[4].

In the past ten years, however, international mobility options for Malians have narrowed. Emigration is increasingly difficult due to rising costs and harsher requirements. Therefore, immobility has become less a matter of desire, and more a question of constraint, compromise, or commitment to the family. Many young men, for whom migration used to be a central aspect of their transition from childhood to adulthood, now constitute a "generation-in-waiting" and perceive immobility as an involuntary condition[5].

2.1.2. Site Selection: Ségou

This chapter explores what it means to stay in Mali today, particularly in Ségou - a region emblematic of the country's layered vulnerabilities and social resilience. Located in central Mali, Ségou is both a zone of high displacement and a historical corridor for internal migration, transhumance, and trade. It has absorbed waves of internally displaced persons (IDPs) while grappling with weak infrastructure, erratic climate, and competition over land and water. Our study focuses on four communes - Pelengana, Sakoiba, Sebougou, and Ségou - allowing for comparative insights across settlement types and population groups, with both local host populations and internally displaced peoples present in each. As a consequence of the selection of this region for the study, we only collected information on the local Malian population and internally displaced persons. We did not survey international migrants or refugees from countries such as Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Nigeria who are part of the foreign population living in Mali.

2.1.3. Local methodology

The study in Mali was conducted across four communes in the Ségou region - Pelengana, Sakoiba, Sebougou, and Ségou - where conflict, displacement, and weak state presence shape highly constrained mobility decisions. The research focused on two primary population groups: long-settled local households (autochthones) and internally displaced persons (IDPs), many of whom arrived in recent years due to ongoing insecurity in central and northern Mali.

To capture local meanings of staying, leaving, and being blocked, four focus groups were conducted across the study sites, engaging both IDPs and autochthones. These discussions helped refine the dimensions of aspiration, fear, and obligation that were most relevant to the local context, ensuring the survey instrument reflected the lived realities of both groups.

The household survey reached 373 respondents, including 188 from autochthonous households and 185 internally displaced individuals. Surveys were distributed evenly across the four communes, and the sampling frame was developed in close coordination with local authorities, who helped produ-

4. Ibid.

5. Gunvor Jónsson, "Migration, Identity and Immobility in a Malian Soninke Village." In The Global Horizon: Expectations of Migration in Africa and the Middle East, ed. by Knut Graw and Samuli Schielke (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2021), 47-65, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qf0sg.8

ce a household registry. This enabled the research team to implement a statistically representative survey through random sampling. The survey was conducted by a local NGO with deep field experience in Ségou, with support from Ayuda en Acción staff. A small incentive was provided to respondents in recognition of their time and participation.

Latent Class Analysis was used to group individuals into distinct immobility profiles based on their migration aspirations, household composition, and past displacement or mobility experiences. These profiles allowed the team to compare forms of immobility across host and displaced populations within the same geographic space.

To deepen the analysis, 30 individuals were selected from the survey sample to participate in in-depth interviews. Selection was based on high and low aspirations to move, with purposeful attention to ensuring variation in gender, age, and displacement characteristics. These narratives revealed how people interpret their current immobility: as protective, imposed, strategic, or temporary. In the Malian context, where state weakness and community ties both shape possibilities,

staying is rarely neutral—it is often a choice made under pressure.

2.2. Types of Immobility in Mali

People stay for different reasons. Some are held back by poverty, insecurity, or family responsibilities. Others stay because they prefer to. Many fall somewhere in between. This section introduces a typology of immobility derived from latent class analysis (LCA) and reinforced through qualitative interviews conducted across four communes: Pelengana, Sakoiba, Sebougou, and Ségou.

Three segments emerge from the data, reflecting distinct experiences of immobility: staying because people must, staying because they are uncertain or constrained by household dynamics, and staying because they choose to. These segments reflect not only socioeconomic differences, but also variation in aspirations and capabilities—shaped by gender, age, displacement history, household structure, and institutional access.

The population includes two main groups: some have never migrated and remain in their communities of origin ("autochthones"), while others are internally displaced, often living in temporary or semi-permanent sites. These categories cut across the first two segments, with both autochthonous and displaced individuals present—though displaced people are slightly more concentrated in Segment 1. In contrast, Segment 3 consists almost entirely of host community households. These positions—whether displaced or not—shape how people imagine the future and how they describe staying: as loss, as compromise, or as commitment.

Each segment is also defined by a different aspirational orientation. For some, aspirations are instrumental—migration or staying is a means to an end, such as survival or income. For others, aspirations are conditional—shaped by uncertainty, obligation, or a lack of readiness. And for a few, staying reflects intrinsic goals tied to identity, belonging, or legacy. Understanding these patterns is key to designing interventions that support dignity and real choice in place.

2.2.1. Segment 1: Involuntarily Immobile – Constrained Families

This is the largest segment of the study (73%) and the most structurally constrained. It consists primarily of middle-aged and older adults, both from the host population and the internally displaced, living in host communities or displacement camps. While their circumstances vary, what unites them is a shared lack of viable alternatives: their immobility is shaped by poverty, displacement, caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to opportunity.

Migration is not framed as a possibility. Nearly all respondents had not considered leaving their community in the past year (98%) or the country (96%), and 95% said they would prefer to stay. Even if granted legal documents, 91% would still remain. Most (87%) had made no preparations to migrate in the past five years. Their lives are oriented toward immediate survival—focused on shel-

ter, caregiving, food, and daily income—not mobility.

"I don't have a roof over my head and I can't find a good job to support my family. If I have the opportunity to leave, I will."

Man, 45, displaced, Sakoiba

"I am a pillar for my family, so I am staying."

Woman, 45, autochthone, Sebougou

Statistically, this segment is the poorest across all three segments. Household assets are the lowest (0.43, index 0 to 1), as is property ownership (0.18, index 0 to 1). Remunerated work hours are the shortest (20.2 hours/week), and reliance on subsidies or cash transfers is the highest (30.2%). Formal employment is extremely rare. Many depend on unstable forms of income such as subsistence farming and day labor or receive support from humanitarian actors and government programs. While public infrastructure and services are often limited, this group does benefit from targeted institutional assistance, particularly among displaced populations. Still, this support does not appear not transformative. It sustains survival.

While both IDPs (55%) and autochthonous households (45%) in this segment face poverty, the meanings and manifestations of that poverty differ. Autochthones often describe long-term stagnation—intergenerational hardship, gendered caregiving roles, and systemic neglect. Their aspirations focus on stability through local development: vocational training, women's entrepreneurship, or youth initiatives.

"I am staying because I am responsible for my children, and we've always lived here. But things are hard—we need ways to earn, not just survive."

Woman, 46, autochthone, Segou

Displaced people, by contrast, express a kind of precarity-in-motion - suspended lives shaped by recent trauma, forced displacement, and the loss of land, community, and autonomy.

Their poverty is often sharper and more recent, marked by disrupted livelihoods and overcrowded camps. Return to their place of origin remains their top priority, even above improving local conditions.

"For me, the best thing is to return to one's homeland as soon as there is some stability."

Man, 45, displaced, Sakoiba

"In the current community there is a lot of stability, and that is what I like the most. But we are displaced, and our greatest desire is to return to our place of origin."

Man, 46, displaced, Segou

"We appreciate the way people treat us with respect and consideration. Other than that, we don't appreciate too much. We want to go back to our place of origin, or to have good housing, ensure health and education for the children and, above all,

ensure food security."

Man, 45, displaced, Segou

These contrasting meanings of structural poverty are also visible in how communities articulate their needs. In Sebougou, a focus group of 12 autochthonous residents—five men and seven women—emphasized support for women's entrepreneurship, youth-led businesses, and market access. These aspirations, while modest, suggest a vision for productive inclusion in place.

Meanwhile, in Zogofina camp (Sakoiba), a focus group of six men and six women—all IDPs—voiced priorities centered on survival: food kits, agricultural inputs, and support for job creation through small-scale agri-food processing. Their concerns reflect acute deprivation and the urgent need for stabilization before future planning is even imaginable. This is a group shaped by caregiving burdens, interrupted life plans, and vanishing options. Households are large (9 members on average), and roles are often fixed by necessity. Gender plays a central role: women stay as protectors and providers of last resort, while men also describe being held in place by duty and fear of what lies beyond. These dynamics are clearly reflected in the stories of Dembélé and Boubacary, whose narratives illustrate how responsibility, fear, and structural constraint converge to make staying the only viable path.

"I have decided to stay because, as a father, I am the only breadwinner and know that my children would not be well off if I left."

Man, 40, displaced, Sebougou

"Migration would be too difficult due to my age and family responsibilities. Also, I do not have enough money to go through migration procedures or organize a journey abroad."

Woman, 46, autochthone, Segou

Narrative: Boubacary

Boubacary is a 40-year-old internally displaced man in Sebougou. He is a trader and farmer; however, he is not satisfied with the fact that his income is variable and fears that he will not be able to provide enough for his family's needs at some point. Therefore, his dream for the future is to have a stable income that will allow him to support his family and save for the long term. He wants to see his children grow up and provide them with a good education. He has not prepared himself to migrate abroad and admits that family responsibilities are overwhelming for him. He has decided to stay because, as a father, he is the only breadwinner and knows that his children would not be well off if he left. He is also concerned about the possibility of being discriminated against abroad and, being a displaced person, would prefer to return to his hometown once peace and stability return.

Narrative: Dembélé

Dembélé, a 46-year-old woman living in the commune of Ségou, is head of household and has to provide for her children. However, her employment situation is not good, as she only gets occasional jobs such as washing clothes or preparing food for other people. She has decided to stay, as migrating would be too difficult due to her age and family responsibilities. Also, she does not have enough money to go through migration procedures or organize a journey abroad. In case migration becomes a necessity for her household, she would convince a relative rather than migrate herself. To improve her situation locally, she recommends that training be provided to female heads of household in areas that could help them access better employment, such as sewing and the food processing industry.

This is not voluntary immobility, it is immobility by constraint. Still, amid that constraint, people like Dembélé and Boubacary hold their families together. Their stories remind us that staying is not always about choice, but it is often about care, responsibility, and resilience. This is a group where the very conditions of choice have eroded because of few options, little support, and overwhelming family responsibilities.

2.2.2. Segment 2: Aspiring Movers – Youthful, Educated, Yet Constrained

This is the second largest segment in the study (17%) and represents a group caught between aspiration and constraint. Unlike Segment 1, where staying is largely involuntary and rooted in structural poverty, respondents in this segment actively imagine migrating—but remain stuck. Their immobility reflects neither full resignation nor decisive choice. Instead, it is shaped by tensions between individual desire and collective responsibility.

This group is the youngest of the three segments (mean age: 41.7), and overwhelmingly male (89.1%). They are also the most educated (6.2 years), though not significantly more than Segment 3. These are people who, on paper, appear more potentially mobile. They are more digitally connected (94.2% use digital wallets), more likely to report savings (25.9%) or loans (64.6%), and work longer paid hours than Segment 1 (31.5 hours/week). Their labor is concentrated in informal work (44.2%) and marginal formal employment (11%), with less reliance on subsidies (13.1%). They represent a fragile, aspirational stratum - not rooted in subsistence, but still unable to move.

What makes this segment analytically distinct is the disjuncture between individual and household aspirations. At the personal level, desire to migrate is strong: only 24% say they would prefer to stay, and just 18% would remain even if given legal migration documents—considerably lower than Segment 1. Yet individual aspirations diverge from the household. Nearly half say no one in their household wants to leave, and many live in multigenerational families where elders or heads of household shape decisions.

These intra-household negotiations may constrain action, producing a form of reluctant stasis— waiting for movement that hasn't yet materialized.

> *"I thought about going abroad, but I didn't prepare myself because I didn't have enough money."*
>
> `Man, 45, displaced, Sakoiba`

> *"I'm staying for now, but if something improves, maybe I'll have a future here."*
>
> `Man, 35, autochthone, Sebougou`

This group lives in the same-sized households as Segment 1 (average 8.8 members), but with fewer elderly members and more contact with diasporic networks, as measured with mobility knowledge. They are more likely to use digital tools, and their financial practices—though limited—suggest higher economic engagement. Compared to Segment

1, this is a younger, leaner, and more externally oriented group. Compared to Segment 3, however, they lack land, autonomy, and a firm place in the local economy.

Despite their relative youth and education, 69% believe they will still be in the community in five years—the highest of any group. This dissonance reveals how aspirations remain unfulfilled not because people lack vision, but because they lack alignment with household gatekeepers, economic safety nets, or enabling institutions. Migration is desired—but postponed, negotiated, or mentally deferred.

These tensions surface most clearly in the dynamics of gender. While men experience pressure to prove themselves economically before leaving, women report relational deference. Men hesitate out of responsibility; women wait on permission. Decision-making is shaped less by capability than by hierarchy—whether to parents, partners, or social norms.

> *"I was encouraged by some emigrants to go abroad, but personally I didn't want to because I'm responsible for my family so I can't go and leave them here. My family and friends play an important role in my decision to stay."*
>
> Woman, 38, displaced, Ségou

While more in this segment are autochthones (57.8%) compared to Segment 1, a significant share (42.2%) are displaced. The difference is less in mobility status than in mobility psychology: many feel they are at a crossroads but cannot yet take the next step. They imagine a different life, but are caught between ambition and constraint.

Consider Altine's story. It reflects the broader gender dynamic for the 10% of women in Segment 2. While women are tethered by roles, men are weighed down by expectations. In this group, staying is not resignation—it is anticipation, deferral, and a cautious hope.

This is a segment of suspended ambition. Compared to Segment 1, they are younger, more connected, and more hopeful—but they are not free. Compared to Segment 3, they are more open to change, but less rooted in land or community. They are, in many ways, the transitional class of immobility—restless, restrained, and waiting for conditions to align. Neither men nor women in this segment are anchored nor truly mobile.

Narrative Profile: Altine

Altine, a 20-year-old displaced woman living in Sakoiba. She is Muslim, married, has children and enjoys a friendly relationship with the people in her host community. However, her immobility is neither explained by her age, nor her religion, nor the bond with her community. She emphasizes that her role within the household is key. She is a housewife and "obeys the mandates of her gender", which means accompanying her husband wherever he chooses to be. Following the hierarchy of the household, it is her husband who made the decision to stay, and not her. Consequently, she has never sought information about job opportunities abroad, migration policies, or diaspora networks. She has confidence in the political authorities and hopes that her host community's situation will improve in the future.

Her hopes now rest with the improvement of the host community and the responsiveness of local authorities. Her story reflects the broader gender dynamic in segment 2, women tethered by hierarchy, men caught between obligation and ambition.

2.2.3. Segment 3: Voluntary Anchors – Stability and Legacy

This is the smallest segment in the study (11.4%) but the most distinctive. While Segment 1 reflects involuntary or acquiescent immobility, and Segment 2 captures frustrated aspiration and deferred movement, Segment 3 reflects intentional staying. Individuals in this group remain in place not due to inability, but because they see staying as a form of stewardship—an act of cultural, familial, and generational responsibility.

Members of this segment are older (mean age: 60.1) and almost entirely autochthonous (95.6%), with deep roots in their communities. They are also the most materially secure: they report the highest levels of property ownership (0.70, index 0 to 1), household assets (0.67, index 0 to 1), and savings (78%). They live in large multigenerational households—averaging 16.3 members—and overwhelmingly identify as heads of household or key decision-makers. Nearly 84% live in family-owned homes, and 15% have inherited property. Their livelihoods are grounded in land, self-employment (91%), and agropastoral activities (56.6%). Unlike other groups, their aspirations are not oriented toward migration or economic escape, but toward continuity, care, and community development. For them, staying is not the absence of a path—it is the path. It reflects purpose, identity, and the desire to leave something behind for future generations.

> *"We are very rooted in our culture here, but that does not influence our decision to stay. We want to stay here to develop our*

community and prepare a better future for our children."

Woman, 54, autochthone, Pelengana

Segment 3 is also defined by a strong ethic of intergenerational solidarity. Many act as advisors or supporters to younger family members who do migrate—financially, emotionally, or strategically. Their immobility does not contradict migration; it complements it. Within these families, the logic is not "everyone stays" or "everyone goes," but a negotiated balance—the elder anchors the household while others explore options.

"At my age, I feel too attached to my roots here. I'm very attached to my traditions and my identity is an essential part of my motivation to stay."

Woman, 61, autochthone, Sebougou

They are also the most institutionally connected: 87.9% have access to loans, and many lead or participate in community organizations. Trust in local governance is high—even when skepticism about the national government persists. These are individuals who act as community stabilizers, mediating disputes, guiding decisions, and sustaining the fabric of neighborhood life.

Narrative: Kadidiatou

Kadidiatou lives in Sebougou. She is very confident about her decision to stay. She considers herself "a pillar" of her family, as she supports her husband and children in overcoming material and emotional difficulties. Her dream for the future is to see her children succeed and contribute to the development of their commune. Being an elderly woman, she has built over the years a strong bond with her neighbors. Her commune faces problems with access to basic services; especially, access to electricity has been hampered by last year's floods. However, her religious faith and community support give her the strength to face these difficulties, and she has not lost confidence in the political authorities. Even though some of them are corrupt, she trusts them because she perceives that they keep in touch with the population, know their needs, and are committed to solving problems: "*I trust the public authorities, even though some of them are corrupt, because they listen to us and know what we need.*"

Kadidiatou's experience is emblematic of Segment 3. She has lived through transitions—political, environmental, generational—and remains grounded by a sense of duty and belonging. . She has not stayed because she was blocked. She has stayed because staying is her legacy.

Unlike the constrained immobility of Segment 1 or the deferred aspiration of Segment 2, Segment 3 represents a third way: staying as strategy, stewardship, and strength. These are not stuck households. They are rooted households—with roles negotiated across generations and genders, where women like Kadidiatou are not passive dependents, but active leaders.

Their lives reveal how immobility can be chosen and dignified. They remind us that staying is not always the failure to go—but often the decision to build, protect, and endure.

2.3. The logics behind aspirations and capabilities in Mali

This section deepens the analysis by looking across the segments to unpack the logic behind people's aspirations and capabilities. Immobility in Mali reflects a range of motivations—instrumental, conditional, and intrinsic—and how these interact with structural constraints. Drawing from the segment-level analysis, it identifies six cross-cutting dimensions that shape how people assess their futures, make decisions about movement, and interpret the meaning of staying.

Understanding these dynamics is essential. Mobility decisions—whether delayed, delegated, or deferred—are rarely individual. They emerge through negotiation and responsibility amid constraints. Six core themes help explain how people in Segou, Mali experience the opportunity or impossibility of movement—and how staying reflects more than a lack of mobility.

2.3.1. Aspirations: Instrumental, Conditional, and Intrinsic

Aspirations differ not just in strength but in kind. In Segment 1, aspirations are primarily instrumental. Migration, if conceived, is imagined only as a way to meet basic needs like food, income, or security.

In many cases, even these minimal aspirations are drowned out by daily hardship and caregiving duties. In Segment 2, aspirations are more conditional. People often speak of alternatives and intentions to migrate, but these are placed on hold—waiting for money, household permission, or a sense of readiness. Migration is not dismissed, but deferred. In Segment 3, aspirations are intrinsic. People choose to stay because they want to. Their goals are bound up with identity, stability, and legacy.

These orientations are not fixed. Conditional aspirations can deepen into committed staying if people gain recognition or institutional support. Conversely, instrumental aspirations may fade altogether when no path to change appears.

Immobility is deeply gendered. In Segments 1 and 2, many women stay because of caregiving responsibilities—for children, elders, or dependent family members

2.3.2. Displacement: From Disruption to Re-anchoring

Displacement features prominently in Segments 1 and 2, but with very different implications. In Segment 1, displacement is a source of dislocation. People describe their current lives as temporary, unstable, and filled with loss. They are not building anything new—they are surviving. In Segment 2, displacement intensifies household tension and emotional strain. People feel urgency to move on or find something better, but their paths are blocked or unclear.

Segment 3 includes very few displaced individuals. Where environmental shocks have occurred, people tend to describe successful recovery and reinvestment in place. Rather than derailing life, these events became turning points that reinforced the decision to remain. What distinguishes these experiences is not just the event itself, but the capacity to rebuild and the presence of support.

2.3.3. Gender: Role, Obligation, and Constraint

Immobility is deeply gendered. In Segments 1 and 2, many women stay because of caregiving responsibilities—for children, elders, or dependent family members. Their roles are non-negotiable, and few imagine leaving as a real option. In Segment 2, young women like Altine stay because they follow household decisions. Their role in the migration decision is secondary or absent. “I just obey the principles of my gender. A woman's duty is to follow her husband and stay by his side forever,” one woman in Sakoiba explained.

For men in Segment 2, aspirations to migrate are often delayed out of responsibility. Migration is something they want, but feel unable to pursue because of duty to the family or the lack of resources. In Segment 1, staying is often portrayed as a necessity—both financial and emotional. In Segment 3, by contrast, gender roles are more flexible. Women like Kadidiatou lead families and civic associations, and frame staying as a deliberate act of responsibility and leadership. Here, caregiving is not a constraint—it is a source of purpose and standing.

2.3.4. Households: Negotiation and Interdependence

Households are the central unit of migration decision-making. In Segment 2, aspirations are often shaped by negotiation with family

members. People delay migration to support a sibling's education, wait for a spouse's approval, or postpone action until conditions feel right for everyone. These decisions reflect interdependence but also produce delay, frustration, and uncertainty. In Segment 1, these negotiations are largely absent—decisions are dictated by constraints, not choice.

In Segment 3, household strategy is more explicit and coordinated. Elders remain in place to maintain the home, while younger relatives are encouraged to migrate, work, or study elsewhere. Mobility is part of a longer-term household strategy, not a rejection of the home. These dynamics show that immobility is rarely an individual position—it is a function of who people live with, what roles they hold, and how decisions are distributed across the family.

2.3.5. Institutions: Trust and Action

Institutions shape whether people see staying as a viable option. In Segment 1, trust in the state is almost nonexistent. People rely on NGOs for survival, but these programs are often short-lived and fail to provide lasting change. The result is a pervasive sense of abandonment. In Segment 2, experiences are mixed. Some point to schools, clinics, or legal services that support staying, but many also describe disappointment or inconsistent follow-through. This creates ambivalence: enough to stay for now, but not enough to believe in the future.

In Segment 3, community trust is high. People often engage directly with neighborhood leaders, women's groups, and community organizations that provide support during difficult times. As for public institutions, some interviewees trust them—not because they are perfect, but because they are close and responsive, even if not always transparent. As Kadidiatou stated, "I trust the public authorities, even though some of them are corrupt, because they listen to us and know what we need." In this sense, community trust becomes a capability. It enables people to plan, act, invest their time, and commit in the place where they live.

Institutions shape whether people see staying as a viable option. In Segment 1, trust in the state is almost nonexistent

2.3.6. Climate: Constraint, Hesitation, and Adaptation

Climate risk reinforces immobility—but not in uniform ways. In Segment 1, exposure to drought, flooding, and other shocks is high. These events threaten survival and force people to focus on daily recovery, not future mobility. Migration is not a response; it is simply not possible. In Segment 2, environmental stress contributes to uncertainty. People are more likely to see migration as a way out but hesitate because of cost, safety

concerns, or responsibility for others. Climate stress increases the stakes, but doesn't always foster action.

In Segment 3, people describe adaptation. They store water, rotate crops, organize collectively, or invest in infrastructure. Climate shocks are serious, but they do not destabilize the household. These families have both the capability and the social structure to absorb shocks without moving. Again, it is not the risk itself, but the resources and roles available that shape whether people can adapt in place.

Across the three segments, the interplay of aspiration and capability is shaped by age, gender, displacement, trust, household dynamics, and exposure to environmental risk. In Segment 1, low capability and limited agency produce survival-level aspirations or resignation. In Segment 2, aspirations are higher but blocked—by finances, household constraint, or institutional uncertainty. In Segment 3, people stay because they want to—and because they can.

These dynamics are not fixed. Aspirations change with lifestage. Capabilities change with recognition and support. The right to stay is meaningful only when people have the conditions to choose it freely. For some, that means reducing constraint.

For others, it means reinforcing the value of staying through investment and recognition. Understanding these differences is essential for designing policies that match the realities people live—not the assumptions we project.

2.4. Program and Policy Recommendations for Mali

Immobility in Mali is not a single experience, nor a simple absence of migration. It is a condition shaped by aspiration, capability, and constraint. This study has shown that people stay under very different circumstances: some with no viable alternative, others while waiting for opportunity, and some because staying affirms their purpose and role in the community. These differences must shape the design of both programs and policies. The recommendations below respond to the lived realities documented in Segments 1, 2, and 3.

Across all three segments, the household emerges as the key unit shaping immobility—whether through care responsibilities, decision-making hierarchies, intergenerational negotiation, or shared constraints. In Segment 1, survival is organized at the household level, especially among displaced or female-headed families. In Segment 2, aspirations are often postponed or negotiated within households. In Segment 3, households act as deliberate anchors of stability, balancing migration and staying across generations.

Programming should treat the household not just as a demographic fact, but as the primary site where aspirations are formed and acted on—or delayed.

2.4.1. Program Recommendations

2.4.1.1. Address Survival-Based Immobility Through Care-Aware Support for Constrained Households and Communities

As seen in Segment 1, many households are immobilized due to caregiving responsibilities, extreme poverty, displacement, or fragile livelihoods. These families—mostly headed by women or older adults—are not in a position to consider migration. Their goal is daily survival. Development and humanitarian actors can design interventions at the family and community level that recognize, reduce, and redistribute care work. This could include community-based care models based on a co-responsibility approach, where not only families take on care work, but also the community, local governments, and the private sector, applying the International Labor Organization (ILO) 5R framework[1].

Likewise, organizations could incorporate elements of revitalizing local economies and strengthening livelihoods so that people can increase their capacities and plan for a dignified future, whether in their territory or by migrating.

2.4.1.2. Support Youth Aspirations Through Local Economic Options and Migration Readiness

Segment 2 reveals a group of young men and women whose aspirations to migrate are blocked by structural constraints. Many are informally employed, rely on loans, and are highly digitally connected but lack institutional scaffolding. Development actors can respond by combining its youth employment and resilience work with mobility preparedness. This includes youth-led vocational training, digital literacy, access to seed capital, and savings programs—but also safe migration planning for those considering departure. Programs should include gender-sensitive mentoring networks and peer platforms that recognize young people's real choices: to stay, to leave, or to move between the two. Interventions should also address the ways youth aspirations are shaped—and often constrained—within the household.

2.4.1.3. Recognize and Invest in Anchored Households as Stability Systems

Segment 3 shows that staying can be a strategy rooted in household cohesion. Many older residents—especially women like Kadidiatou—choose to remain not only out of legacy or land ties, but because they play a central role in sustaining multigenerational households. These households are not static—they are active systems where care, work, and mobility are negotiated. Development and humanitarian actors should invest in anchored households as stability systems. This could include grants to support care-

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1. The 5R framework focuses on Recognizing, Redistributing, and Reducing unpaid care work, as well as Rewarding and Representing paid care work. See UN Women. A Toolkit on Paid and Unpaid Care Work: From 3Rs to 5Rs. 2022, https://globalallianceforcare.org/en/community/resources/425-global-resource-61.html.https://globalallianceforcare.org/en/community/resources/425-global-resource-61.html?view-obj#:~:text=This%20updated%20toolkit%20follows%20the,representation%2C%20social%20dialogue%2C%20and%20collective

Many older residents—especially women like Kadidiatou—choose to remain not only out of legacy or land ties, but because they play a central role in sustaining multigenerational households

giving, household-level resilience planning, and infrastructure improvements that reflect intergenerational needs (e.g., accessible housing, food storage, shared utilities). These families already hold the social fabric together. Strengthening them helps communities weather crises without losing their anchors.

2.4.1.4. Make Climate Adaptation a Platform for Mobility Choice

In all three segments, climate stress was a critical constraint—especially in Segment 1. Development actors already working in agroecology, circular economy and waste management, water management, and food systems could be well positioned to integrate a mobility lens. Adaptation projects should directly support immobile populations by restoring environmental assets (e.g., degraded land, water systems) while also improving people's capacity to plan their futures. Programs might include climate-linked cash transfers, collective agro-processing projects, or women-led adaptation committees. By stabilizing the environment, they can widen the range of dignified choices and reduce forced immobility. Engaging voluntary anchors in adaptation efforts and promoting climate justice narratives can help shape an effective strategy for building community resilience.

2.4.1.5. Strengthen Trust and Local Institutions as Enablers of Aspiration

Trust in local institutions plays a central role in whether people feel they can shape their futures. In Segment 1—the largest group—reliance on humanitarian aid is common, while confidence in state institutions is limited, especially among displaced populations. This weak institutional presence reinforces immobility by reducing people's perceived options and agency. In Segment 2, aspirations are higher but deferred; inconsistent services and limited civic engagement create uncertainty about whether staying offers a viable path forward. In Segment 3, trust in local leaders enables long-term staying, grounded in stability and responsibility. Strengthening local institutions is therefore essential—not just for delivering services, but as a foundation for aspiration, inclusion, and investment in place. Development and humanitarian actors should adopt approaches aligned with the development–humanitarian–peace nexus, including co-managed services, community oversight, participatory dialogue, and capacity-building for local officials. Training should

focus on planning, service continuity, and engagement strategies that respond to the gendered and generational realities of mobility and care. Importantly, programs should treat trust as a capability, rather than an output.

2.4.2. Policy Recommendations

2.4.2.1. Recognize Immobility as a Development Condition

Current migration and displacement policies in Mali overlook those who remain in high-risk areas—not by choice, but by constraint. The national government and humanitarian actors should explicitly recognize immobility as a distinct condition requiring protection, support, and inclusion. This includes mapping immobile populations, integrating them into territorial development plans, and ensuring they are eligible for services typically aimed at displaced or mobile groups.

2.4.2.2. Expand Decentralized Services in Conflict-Affected and Transitional Areas

Access to public services—health, education, social protection, documentation—is critical to people's sense of capability. In Mali's conflict-affected regions, service withdrawal reinforces forced immobility.

National and regional governments, supported by NGOs, should expand decentralized, mobile, or co-delivered service models in areas where both host and displaced communities remain in place. This includes educational continuity, maternal health, and mobile financial services.

2.4.2.3. Design Social Protection Schemes that Reflect Mobility and Care Patterns

Many immobile households are excluded from support because they do not fit neatly into existing categories. Women caregivers, elderly household heads, and youth in high-emigration areas are especially under-served. Mali's evolving social protection strategy should include flexible eligibility pathways for these groups, including care-based transfer programs, youth savings initiatives, and rural household stabilization funds. Support should also reflect intra-household migration strategies, recognizing that immobile anchors often enable others to leave.

2.4.2.4. Integrate Climate-Related Immobility into Adaptation Policy

Climate stress is forcing people to stay in degraded environments, not because they prefer to, but because they have nowhere to go. Mali's national adaptation strategy should explicitly address the vulnerability of immobile households in areas affected by drought, flooding, and environmental degradation. This includes prioritizing them for infrastructure investment, early warning systems, and resilient livelihoods.

Climate adaptation and infrastructure projects, such as irrigation schemes, urban expansion, or land restoration, can unintentionally reinforce immobility by excluding or

displacing already-vulnerable populations. In Mali, these projects may alter access to land, water, or housing, disproportionately affecting those unable to relocate or advocate for themselves. National and local planning authorities, supported by development partners, should implement social and environmental safeguards that explicitly assess how immobile populations are impacted.

This includes mandatory mobility-sensitive impact assessments, participatory planning processes with immobile residents, and grievance mechanisms. By addressing the unintended immobility consequences of well-intended adaptation efforts, this policy ensures that infrastructure and climate responses do not deepen existing inequalities or create new vulnerabilities.

2.4.2.5. Reframe Staying as a Legitimate and Supported Life Path

Finally, immobility must be reframed—not as a failure to migrate, but as a valid and often strategic response to context. Programs, media, and public policy should shift the narrative from one of being "left behind" to one of "holding ground." This could include national campaigns featuring immobile leaders, integration of immobility into education and youth policy, and recognition of place-based contributions in development indicators. Dignified staying requires both visibility and investment.

2.4.2.6. Recognize the Immobility of Women as a Key Dimension of Equity and Empowerment

Immobile women in Mali—particularly female-headed households, caregivers, and older women—face intersecting forms of vulnerability linked to gender, poverty, caregiving responsibilities, and mobility constraints. Local and national public policies could adopt gender-sensitive and intersectional frameworks that acknowledge and address these structural inequalities. This includes promoting and strengthening intergenerational spaces of sorority, care, and protection among women (youth, adults, and elders), as well as creating community mechanisms for female participation and leadership in territories affected by immobility. Strategies should be connected to social protection systems, care networks, and local planning processes to ensure that the voices of immobile women are not only heard but also shape the design of dignified and sustainable solutions.

Immobile women in Mali—particularly female-headed households, caregivers, and older women—face intersecting forms of vulnerability linked to gender, poverty, caregiving responsibilities, and mobility constraints

In addition, given the critical role of forced displacement in shaping immobility dynamics, a differentiated policy response is needed for displaced persons who remain immobile. This entails identifying their specific needs across gender and age groups and ensuring their effective inclusion in service provision, protection schemes, and community stabilization programs—recognizing the diverse and dynamic nature of their trajectories.

Graph 1. Segmentation Visualization in Mali

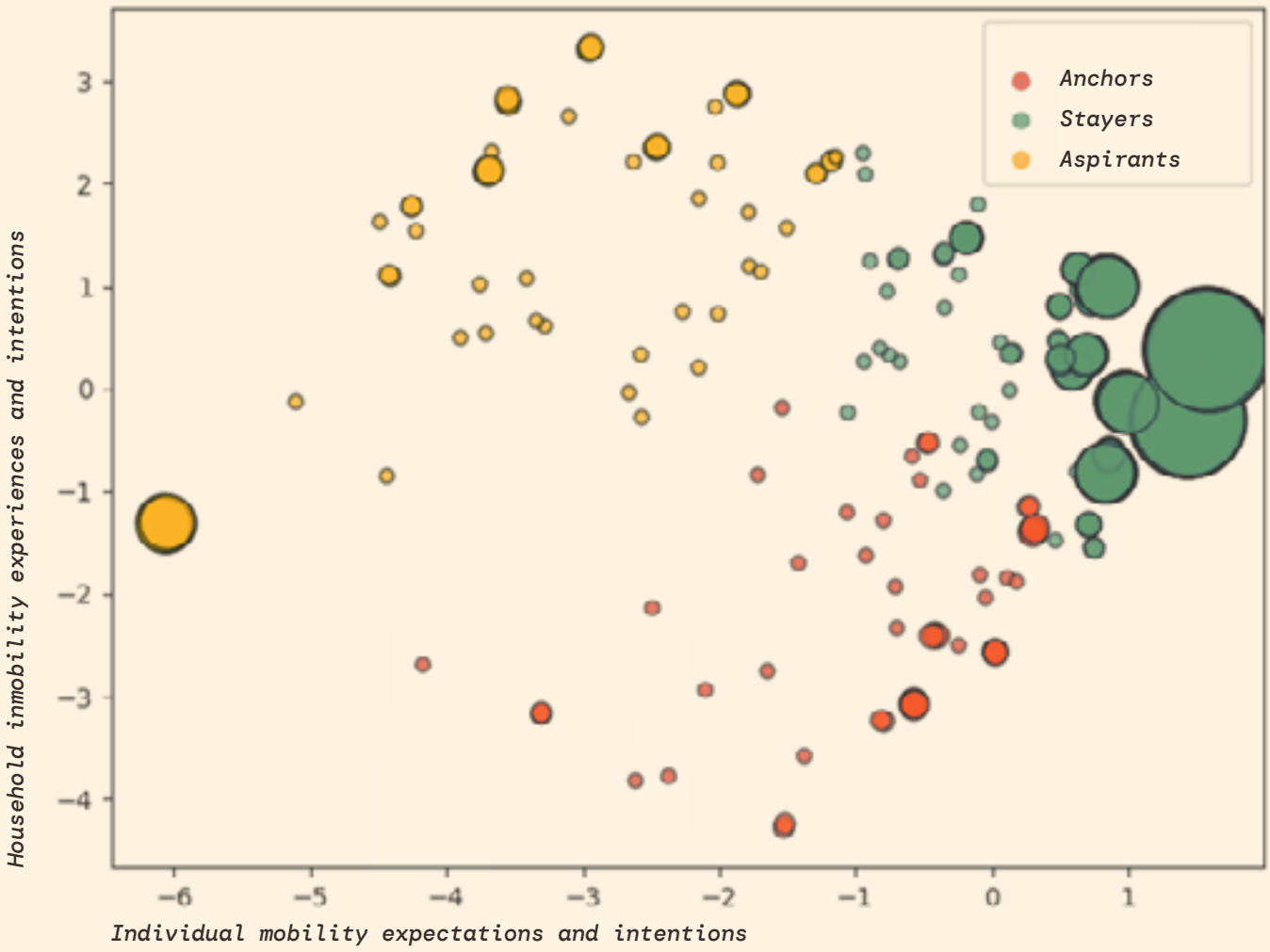

Table 1. Aspirations in Mali

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Segment 3: Anchors	Significance Comparison	Overall
Segment Size	73%	16%	11%		
Individual (% Stay)					
Did not prepare to leave country in last 5 years	Very High (87%)	Very Low (20%)	Very High (85%)	a, c	76%
Did not consider leaving country last 12 months	Very High (96%)	Very Low (20%)	Very High (97%)	a, c	83%
Did not consider leaving community last 12 months	Very High (98%)	Low (37%)	Very High (90%)	a, b, c	88%
Would like to stay	Very High (95%)	Low (24%)	Very High (92%)	a, c	83%
Even if given documents, would stay in country	High (91%)	Very Low (18%)	High (78%)	a, b, c	78%
Think will still be here in 5 years	Medium (57%)	High (69%)	Medium (41%)	c	57%
Household (% Stay)					
You or someone in household did not leave last 5 years	Very High (96%)	Very High (85%)	Low (25%)	a, b, c	86%
Nobody close (family or friend) left last 5 years	Very High (99%)	Very High (86%)	Medium (56%)	a, b, c	92%
You or someone in household do not migrate cyclically	Very High (93%)	High (74%)	Low (32%)	a, b, c	83%
Nobody in your household wants to leave	Very High (82%)	Medium (43%)	Low (24%)	a, b	70%

Note: Significance comparison indicates a difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segment: a: segment 1 and segment 2, b: segment 1 and segment 3, and c: segment 2 and segment 3.

Table 2. Characteristics and Capabilities in Mali

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Segment 3: Anchors	Significance Comparison
Demographics (Respondent)				
Sex: Female	36.2%	10.9%	9.9%	a, b
Age (mean)	46.9	41.7	60.1	a, b, c
Education (years)	4.15	6.18	5.77	a, b
Civil Status: With Partner	86.5%	96.7%	98.7%	a
Region: Pelengana	22.6%	27.3%	0.0%	
Region: Sakoiba	25.8%	30.4%	20.8%	b, c
Region: Sebougou	19.6%	22.2%	71.9%	
Region: Segou	32.0%	20.2%	7.4%	
Household Structure & Livelihood				
Household Members (mean)	8.92	8.82	16.33	b, c
Household Assets (index 0 to 1)	0.43	0.49	0.67	a, b, c
Property (index 0 to 1)	0.18	0.27	0.70	a, b, c
Main income source: Self-employment	37.2%	31.8%	91.1%	
Main income source: Informal	26.9%	44.2%	1.6%	a, b, c
Main income source: Formal	5.7%	11.0%	1.2%	
Main income source: Subsidies/ transfers	30.2%	13.1%	6.1%	
Labor livelihood: Agropastoral	18.8%	17.2%	56.6%	b, c

Labor livelihood: Unemployed	18.5%	12.1%	2.8%	
Labor livelihood: Informal	25.5%	50.1%	46.7%	a, b
Labor livelihood: Other	11.7%	4.6%	10.6%	
Labor livelihood: Employed	13.7%	15.6%	4.6%	
Remunerated Work Hours (weekly, mean)	20.18	31.52	35.45	a, b
Domestic Work Hours (weekly, mean)	14.95	13.36	13.97	
Care Responsibility (Household and Land)	86.0%	85.5%	95.4%	
Household Tenure: Rented	16.6%	3.2%	0.0%	
Household Tenure: Family/ household	35.8%	47.7%	83.9%	
Household Tenure: Government help	6.9%	0.0%	0.0%	
Household Tenure: Inheritance	4.0%	5.2%	15.0%	b, c
Household Tenure: Displaced site	36.7%	43.9%	1.1%	
Savings	19.7%	25.9%	78.0%	b, c
Loans	61.9%	64.6%	87.9%	b, c
Digital Wallet	68.4%	94.2%	84.6%	a, b
Household SES (mean 0 to 10)	4.1	3.8	4.8	
Financial Satisfaction (very bad 1 to 5 very good)	2.4	2.5	2.7	
Gender Norms (mean 0 to 1)	0.58	0.54	0.63	
Health Status (Respondent)				
Expected Health & Education (1 to 3)	2.80	2.66	2.81	a, c

Physical Health (good and very good)	57.79%	77.10%	44.25%	
Mental Health (Anxiety Disorder)	13.4%	11.4%	2.7%	
Optimism	4.87	4.48	4.65	a
Conflict and Stress (Household)				
Climate Stress	54.2%	53.8%	73.9%	b, c
Violence Experienced	42.4%	40.8%	58.1%	
Land Conflict	25.7%	21.6%	69.9%	b, c
Water Conflict	3.6%	2.1%	1.9%	
Security Issues (mean 1 to 4)	2.83	2.84	2.91	
Trust (mean 1 to 4): Government	3.39	3.25	3.36	
Mobility Status and Knowledge				
Status: Autochtone	44.9%	57.8%	95.6%	a, b, c
Status: Internally Displaced (IDPs)	55.1%	42.2%	4.4%	
Trust (mean 1 to 4): Government	4.3%	17.0%	28.2%	b, c

Note: Significance comparison indicates a difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a: segment 1 and segment 2, b: segment 1 and segment 3, and c: segment 2 and segment 3.

Table 3. Immobility Subtypes in Mali

Subtype	Segment	Core Logic	Aspiration Level	Capabilities	Typical Profile
Survival-Driven Stayers	Segment 1: Involuntarily Immobile	Staying out of necessity due to poverty, displacement, or caregiving burdens	Low	Very Low	Middle-aged or older IDPs and host households living in camps or poor neighborhoods
Care-Entrenched Women	Segment 1: Involuntarily Immobile	SStaying as the only viable option while carrying household responsibility	Low	Low	Women heads of household with limited income, often raising children alone
Precarious but Aspirational Youth	Segment 2: Aspirational but Structurally Blocked	Desire to migrate blocked by finances, household influence, or gender norms	High	Low to Moderate	Younger men with informal work, and women deferring to household decisions
Gender-Tethered Wives	Segment 2: Aspirational but Structurally Blocked	Women's mobility decisions deferred to spouse or household hierarchy	Suppressed or deferred	Low	Married displaced women like Altine, dependent on male decision-making
Voluntary Anchors	Segment 3: Voluntary Immobility Anchors	Staying as a deliberate choice tied to land, legacy, and community role	Fulfilled or intrinsic	High	Older men and women in host households with property, savings, and community status

3. Ethiopia: Immobility in the Horn of Africa

3.1. Introduction

3.1.1. Ethiopia Immobility Context

Mobility has long shaped Ethiopia as a means of survival and social advancement. Since the 1970s, Ethiopians have migrated to the United States, the Middle East, Europe, and other parts of Africa in pursuit of education, work, and security. More recently, however, Ethiopia has experienced one of the highest levels of internal displacement on the continent. By mid 2024, an estimated 4.5 million people were internally displaced due to conflict and climate-related disasters, making Ethiopia one of Africa's most displacement-affected nations[1]. A significant share of this internal displacement stems from the civil war that broke out in Tigray in late 2020. The conflict later spread into neighboring regions mainly to Amhara and Afar, causing widespread displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and disruption of livelihoods[2]. At the same time, Ethiopia is the second largest refugee hosting country in Africa after Uganda, sheltering nearly 1.1 million refugees from the neighboring states of Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan as well as Yemen, Syria and Congo[3].

Yet many Ethiopians are not moving. Whether by choice, constraint, or acquiescence[4], significant numbers of people remain rooted in place. In Ethiopia, immobility is shaped by structural, social, and environmental forces that vary across regions and life stages. One survey found that most young Ethiopians express a desire to remain. The reasons for staying differed by gender, socioeconomic background, and location: young men often cited employment, while women emphasized family ties for staying at home. Youth from wealthier or urban households are more likely to point to quality of life and education[5].

Climate change adds another layer of complexity to migration and immobility dyna-

1. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Ethiopia: Internal Displacement Overview (as of June 2024) (New York: OCHA, July 4, 2024), https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-internal-displacement-overview-june-2024

2. Kiya Gezahegne and Oliver Bakewell, National and International Migration Policy in Ethiopia, EFFEXT Background Paper (2023), 6-8

3. Ibid.

4. The aspirations-capabilities framework uses the term acquiescence to designate the type of immobility that combines low levels of both capabilities and aspirations. In other words, it refers to people who cannot migrate but also do not consider it.

5. Kerilyn Schewel and Sonja Fransen, "Formal Education and Migration Aspirations in Ethiopia," Population and Development Review 44, no. 3 (2018): 555-87, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/padr.12159

mics. In Ethiopia and across Eastern Africa, repeated droughts, land degradation, and climate variability have altered both the aspiration and ability to move[6]. While a single drought may not trigger large-scale displacement, cumulative climate shocks increase the likelihood of rural out-migration over time[7]. At the same time, these shocks can trap the poorest, especially in drought-prone areas, making even short-distance moves impossible. For some, mobility becomes an adaptation strategy, while for others, climate pressures create involuntary immobility[8].

This chapter explores these dynamics of immobility in Afar, a region at the crossroads of climate change, conflict, and pastoral transformation.

3.1.2. Site selection: Afar

Afar is one of Ethiopia's most ecologically and politically fragile regions. Situated in the northeastern part of the country, Afar shares borders with both Djibouti and Eritrea. The region is characterized by a harsh, arid environment and remains among the least developed in terms of infrastructure and access to basic services. Administratively, Afar is divided into zones, woredas (districts), and kebeles (wards or neighborhoods). This chapter focuses on two neighboring woredas—Ewa (in Zone 4) and Chifra (in Zone 1)—which are located near the regional border with Tigray. Both were directly affected by the northern conflict. The two sites were selected for their contrasting agropastoral and institutional conditions, as well as their shared exposure to climate shocks and political

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6. Valerie Mueller, Ghada Sheriff, Xiaobo Dou, and Clark Gray, "Temporary Migration and Climate Variation in Eastern Africa," World Development 126 (2020): 104704, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104704

7. Salvatore Di Falco, Anna B. Kis, Martina Viarengo, and Uttam Das, "Leaving Home: Cumulative Climate Shocks and Migration in Sub-Saharan Africa," Environmental and Resource Economics (2023): 1-25

8. Coline Garcia et al., "Unveiling Invisible Climate Im/mobilities: Mixed-Methods Case Study of a Drought-Prone Rural Area of Kersa, Ethiopia," Regional Environmental Change 25, no. 34 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1007/s10113-025-02373-1

instability. The region is regularly affected by prolonged droughts, erratic rainfall, and occasional flash floods from the Awash River. Between 2020 and 2022, four consecutive failed rainy seasons devastated agropastoral livelihoods. These pressures are layered atop structural constraints, including land encroachment, settlement pressures, and road expansion, which have eroded access to grazing corridors and water points. In many areas, particularly Chifra, livestock death and resource depletion have pushed formerly mobile communities into sedentarism and poverty. Mobility, once a key adaptation strategy, is increasingly inaccessible.

Agroecological conditions vary significantly between the two study woredas. Ewa, situated at slightly higher elevation in Zone 4, offers more diversified rangelands and seasonal water sources. Development actors have identified it as a potential site for mixed livelihood resilience strategies. In contrast, Chifra, located in the hotter and drier Zone 1 along the border with Amhara, has long faced severe drought, poor soils, and limited vegetation cover. Its resource base has been further eroded by overlapping crises, making households more vulnerable to shocks.

Conflict has sharply deepened this vulnerability. Both Chifra and Ewa, due to their location near the Tigray border, were severely impacted by the Tigray conflict. From late 2020 through 2022, the districts experienced waves of occupation by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and federal forces. The area also suffered aerial bombardment and mass displacement, as well as damage to schools, clinics, and roads[9]. Civilian casualties and widespread infrastructure destruction disrupted service delivery and fractured livelihoods. Likewise, Ewa was also occupied at one point by the TPLF, resulting in displacement and looted homes. Even after the November 2022 cessation of hostilities, both woredas continued to face challenges in reconstruction, return, and reintegration.

These conditions have fractured livelihoods and disrupted traditional and emerging mobility patterns. Seasonal migration, labor circulation, transhumance, and marriage-related moves have all been constrained by insecurity, administrative breakdown, and climate-related barriers. Meanwhile, Ethiopia as a whole is undergoing a mobility transition[10]. Exposure to external opportunities—especially in the Gulf and South Africa—is growing, particularly among youth. Yet the means to pursue migration remain scarce: legal pathways are limited, social networks fragmented, and documentation inaccessible.

3.1.3. Local methodology

The study in Ethiopia was conducted in the Afar Region, one of the country's most climate-vulnerable and conflict-affected areas. The research focused on two woredas (districts): Ewa in Administrative Zone 4 and Chifra in Zone 1, the latter closer to the Tigray border and more directly impacted by

9. IOM, Annual Report 2023 - Ethiopia, 21.

10. Kerilyn Schewel and Legass Bahir Asmamaw, "Migration and Development in Ethiopia: Exploring the Mechanisms Behind an Emerging Mobility Transition," Migration Studies 9, no. 4 (2021): 1673-1707, https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnab036

wartime violence[11]. Within each woreda, two kebeles (villages/neighborhoods) were selected. Across these sites, mobility is shaped by the erosion of pastoral livelihoods, exposure to conflict, and weak access to formal institutions.

The research was conducted in partnership with Addis Ababa University—host of a Global IDRC Research Chair on Migration and Forced Displacement—and Ayuda en Acción Ethiopia, with additional support from the University of Semera. The team collaborated with community authorities and field personnel from Ayuda en Acción to develop a context-sensitive sampling strategy. In the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame, researchers began with household registries used by government and NGOs. These lists were validated and expanded in coordination with local leaders and community members, who helped identify households by displacement status: returnees from international labor migration, returnees from internal displacement, and non-displaced residents.

Prior to launching the survey, the team did a scoping visit to both woredas. This included one focus group discussion in each site to locally surface relevant dimensions of immobility, such as intra-household dynamics, environmental pressure, economic constraints, gendered expectations, return conditions, and migration aspirations. These insights were used to refine the survey and interview instruments.

The final household survey reached 364 respondents across four kebeles—two in each woreda. In Ewa, 89 surveys were conducted in 1st Budele and 104 in 2nd Budele. In Chifra, 75 surveys were completed in Askoma and 96 in Masgid. In total, 193 respondents were surveyed in Ewa and 171 in Chifra. The sample sought a deliberate balance of male and female respondents, prioritizing those able to speak to household-level aspirations, capabilities, and conditions. Among those surveyed, 154 had not experienced displacement, 171 were returnees from internal displacement, and 39 were returnees from the Gulf states.

To complement the survey, a subsample of 40 in-depth interviews was conducted with selected respondents representing a range of displacement histories, gender, age, and aspiration levels. These interviews revealed the lived narratives behind the statistical patterns.

3.2. Types of Immobility in Ethiopia

In the drought-affected, conflict-stressed Afar, staying can mean many things: a protective choice, a blocked aspiration, or an exhausted condition. This section identifies three distinct configurations of immobility in Chifra and Ewa.

The groups reflect divergent relationships to movement—some aligned around duty and protection, others defined by generational tension in the household or frustrated return after international migration. They also show how household structure, gender,

11. Population estimates are difficult, with Ethiopia's last national census administered in 2007. According to the Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, however, the estimated population sizes in Chifra and Ewa were 128,000 and 63,000, respectively. See https://data.humdata.org/dataset/cod-ps-eth, retrieved on May 25, 2025.

household roles, conflict, climate stress, and prior migration shape how people stay.

The three segments reflect different combinations of aspiration and capability. Segment 1 includes individuals whose mobility options are foreclosed—often caregivers, elders, or widows for whom migration is neither imagined nor discussed. Segment 2 captures younger individuals, often women, who would like to leave but live in households that do not support—or even permit—mobility. Segment 3 includes returnees who have already experienced the risks and traumas of migration, and whose current immobility is shaped by exhaustion, failure, and structural erosion.

This framing allows us to see staying not as a singular state, but as a spectrum of strategies. In Segment 1, immobility reflects care-based duty and economic exclusion. In Segment 2, it emerges from generational tension and relational veto. In Segment 3, it is the aftermath of migration itself—a state of stalled recovery more than stable return. Across all segments, what differentiates people is not only what they have done, but how they imagine what might still be possible.

3.2.1. Segment 1: Acquiescent and Instrumental Stayees

Segment 1 is the largest in the Ethiopia sample, accounting for 75% of respondents. What defines this group is not only that they have not migrated, but that migration is not considered, discussed, or pursued. Only a few have migrated or taken steps to do so. Nearly all respondents say they would prefer to stay in Ethiopia (100%) and in their community (97.1%), even if granted migration documents. Just 6% have considered migrating internationally in the past year, and only 1.9% report that anyone in their household is preparing to do so.

This group stands out as the oldest (mean age: 38.3), with the lowest education levels (1.83 years), and the lowest household asset index (0.10 on a 0 to 1 index) across all segments. Most respondents are women (61%), and over half (53.5%) report being primary caregivers in their households, supporting children, elderly parents, or disabled relatives. Most live in large households (average size: 6.75) and in rural or peripheral kebeles, split between Ewa and Chifra woredas, giving it a broader territorial base than other segments.

Economically, this segment is dominated by agro pastoralist households (84.6%), but that classification obscures an important transition. Many respondents describe a shift away from pastoralism due to drought, livestock loss, or resource conflict. While some continue herding and subsistence farming, others have become increasingly sedentary, taking up informal urban or peri-urban work—like selling firewood, tea, or local bread. These are not stable transitions, but survival adjustments, reflecting the erosion of previous livelihoods. Some remain tied to land but report severe environmental degradation. Access to

Only a few have migrated or taken steps to do so

just 5.3% with international labor migration experience

formal systems remains minimal, with only 2.7% reporting use of financial services, and just 5.3% with international labor migration experience. Their livelihoods are in flux, but without the means—or in many cases, the aspiration—to exit entirely.

Digital access and migration knowledge are the lowest in the sample, while trust in public institutions is medium to low. Compared to other segments, this group reports moderate exposure to violence (52.7%) and includes a mix of internally displaced returnees and households who remained in place during periods of conflict. These overlapping constraints reinforce immobility—not only because opportunities are limited, but because people are cut off from the systems, services, and social networks that would make migration possible.

What distinguishes this group most clearly is that their immobility is not merely structural—it is relational. Many women in this segment are widowed or single heads of household, responsible for raising grandchildren or caring for disabled or elderly relatives.

Men, though fewer in number, describe a protective logic—staying to safeguard land, assets, or the household structure itself. In these circumstances, migration is not rejected, but becomes irrelevant—no longer a viable or discussed option.

> *"I haven't thought of going abroad or elsewhere here in Ethiopia. As I am the only female for my mother, I can't leave, she can not bear the burden. Now, I started considering going away as life becomes difficult for her. Life is difficult for a woman, I have to do everything to support her."*
>
> Woman, 31, Chifra

Another informant added:

> *"I have family here, including my mother and brothers. If separated, the income I get would not suffice to cover expenses for me and them."*
>
> Man, 18, Chifra

The absence of migration here is not passive; it is shaped by caregiving responsibilities, livelihood collapse, and limited support. Some individuals describe conflict-related trauma or failed exit attempts, but still remained—because staying was what made sense in that moment.

> *"During the war, I was here in the town. My husband and I were both sick. After struggling for a while, my husband passed away. During that time, I had nowhere to go as I had no vehicle. So, I remained here suffering a lot. Then, the war was over, the people returned, and I am here selling coffee. I also have children. During the war, we sent the children to relatives in the rural area, and my husband and I stayed here."*
>
> Woman,28, Ewa

Others were pushed into settlement by climate stress and livestock loss—an abrupt end to pastoral life with no viable path forward.

> *"Here there is drought! I don't want my children to suffer from the same problem that I faced. I go through ups and downs for the sake of my children. Drought is getting worse from time to time. In the past, we had huge grasslands; while now they are depleted. For this reason, there is seasonal migration in search of grazing land which sometimes causes conflict."*
>
> Man, Chifra

In these households, roles define what is possible. Caregiving duties, especially among older women, shape decisions around staying. The idea of leaving is not framed as freedom, but as potential abandonment.

> *"I don't go as my children would be abandoned otherwise. I have to take care of my children here. My children are students at 8, 9, 10 grade levels."*
>
> Man, Ewa

Still, not all aspirations have vanished. Some respondents hold modest, hyper-local ambitions of moving to nearby places to start a tea shop, improve housing, or support their children to finish school. These are scaled-down goals, shaped by necessity and duty—not by the prospect of movement.

In terms of aspirations and capabilities, this segment reflects what the literature calls acquiescent immobility: low intention to migrate, combined with limited means to do so. But that label must not obscure what is being carried. These are not passive or disengaged individuals. They are caregivers and protectors, navigating scarcity with deliberate effort. This segment does not resign themselves to staying. Instead, their staying involved quiet, continuous, and deeply relational labor.

Narrative Profile: Yodit

Yodit is a widow living in Ewa with her three children. She struggles to provide for them by selling Qita, a local type of bread. During the war, she wanted to go away but found herself surrounded by heavy gunfire. So, she remained home and still remains in her place of origin for the sake of her children, as they have no father. Her relatives live in Robit and she never visits them. Now, her children are grown up and her youngest child is a footballer. However, she still does not have the intention to migrate, even though she has a relative in Dubai who managed to support her own family out of poverty.

Narrative Profile: Fatuma

Fatuma was born and grew up in Ewa. She is widowed and has three children; the oldest one is 10 years old. She sells coffee and tea for a living but wishes to work in agriculture. Even during the war, she did not leave Ewa because she has a physically disabled father and couldn't find a vehicle to escape with him. Her brother vowed not to abandon their father and the whole family stayed home. Fortunately, they were not hurt. Now, she says that, unless forced, she will never leave her hometown. Even her best friend tried to convince her to migrate to an Arab country for economic reasons, but she declined.

This segment offers a critical reminder that not all immobility reflects stasis. It reflects care-centered strategy and narrowed aspiration in the face of loss. Migration is not part of their imagined future—not because they oppose it, but because their lives are organized around sustaining the lives of others.

3.2.2. Segment 2: Isolated Aspirants in Immobile Households

While Segment 1 reflects constrained staying rooted in caregiving and survival, Segment 2 captures a more conflicted form of immobility: individual aspiration constrained by household immobility. These are people who want to migrate. Many say they would leave if they had the opportunity. Yet they remain still—not by choice alone, but because no one else in their household is moving, planning, or encouraging them to go. Their immobility reflects the weight of intra-household constraint, limited means, and relational obligations that make aspiration difficult to translate into action.

This segment includes 14.4% of the sample. It is not the youngest group overall, but respondents are younger on average than those in Segment 1 (mean age: 34.6). Women make up a slight majority (53%), and almost all respondents report being partnered (95.4%). They live in the largest households (mean size: 7.6), with fewer caregiving duties (29.3%) than in Segment 1 but the highest number of hours spent on domestic work (mean: 36.8).

They also work fewer paid hours per week (23.4) than the other two segments, suggesting that their contributions are often unpaid or invisible. These tendencies point to a dependent household position—especially for younger adults, women, or non-heads of household.

This is the least agropastoral segment, though a majority (73.2%) remain engaged in agropastoral livelihoods. Respondents are more concentrated in Chifra. This group reports the highest self-rated physical health (77% good or very good) and the lowest reported exposure to violence (28.7%)—suggesting that individual well-being and trauma. Many of these respondents express the lowest expectations for improvements in health and education, and report low levels of financial access, migration knowledge, and institutional trust, similar to Segment 1.

Despite their high personal aspirations, migration knowledge in this group remains limited. Unlike Segment 3, where many have firsthand experience abroad, individuals in Segment 2 have little direct or household-level exposure to successful migration. Most have not seen people close to them migrate through legal pathways or return with positive outcomes. What they know often comes from social media, informal sources, or secondhand stories of hardship. This knowledge gap reinforces hesitation: migration is imagined but untested and often shadowed by examples of failure or loss.

What distinguishes this segment most is the disconnect between personal aspiration and collective possibility. At the individual level, many say they would migrate if given legal documents—only 33% say they would prefer to stay. But they are surrounded by households that do not share this outlook: none report that a household member migrated in the past five years, and all say that no one else in their household wants to leave. Migration is imagined—but isolated.

"My parents advise me to remain here! My older sister was a bit sick. After going to Saudi, her health deteriorated and she had to come back. Hence, my parents tell me not to repeat the same mistake. They don't agree with my idea. However, sometimes, the parents initially resist but finally accept when their children insist on going. I have already secured my passport even if I haven't decided yet on my final journey."

Woman, Chifra

For women in this group, gender and religion create additional barriers. Migration is discussed, but framed as difficult, improper, or inaccessible.

"I believe that if I succeed in something, my children will also live a better life. That means, I want to go for the sake of my children. But my decision is at an ideal level and I am not ready for the action. It is the shortage of economic means that prevented me. Also, my religion doesn't allow me to migrate. My religion, Muslim, doesn't allow a woman to travel without her husband or brother."

Woman, Ewa

Even when households are not explicitly opposed, migration is not actively supported. People stay because there is no push, no path, and no one moving with them.

"Most parents do not let their children go for the sake of money. But there is advancement of technology and the people get lots of information now, including discussing with individuals in Arab countries, with videos. This has the power to attract individuals here as they see the good looks of Saudi Arabia and the individuals there. The children are also attracted by the houses built here by individuals who migrated to Saudi."

Man, Ewa

Information and inspiration are accessible, often via technology or neighbors. But the capabilities to act remain limited. Formal pathways exist, but are not yet within reach.

"The interest for the legal means for migration has increased now. The reason for this is the introduction of a program for legally flying to Arab countries. There are a number of individuals who took training in Semera. From this woreda alone, around 400 individuals took the training for legal migration and are ready for that. The legal means is cheaper, while the illegal is expensive—they may ask 700,000 birr [about € 4,620] and million birr [about € 6,600]. In Libya they require 1.4 million birr [about € 9,240]—to pass to Europe."

Man, Chifra

This group is defined by aspiration deferred. They are not indifferent. They are not wholly blocked. But they are alone in their desire, and unable to act without alignment from others around them.

Narrative Profile: Hussien

Hussien is 35 years old and lives in Ewa. He is currently unemployed and financial difficulties have been part of his life for years. He had a wife, but got divorced because he could not support her. Currently their son lives with his wife and her relatives. He believes that families are usually supportive and understanding; but when it comes to migration, they are mostly opposed. He knows people who have asked for loans to migrate abroad, but he can't even do that because he has nothing to give as collateral for the loan. Therefore, the only alternative left to him is migration within the Afar region. His plans include looking for work in the construction sector in Burqa or staying in Ewa and starting his own business. He is very interested in being financially solvent, as he can then remarry and invest in a business that will give him more stability.

Narrative Profile: Rahment

Rahmet lives with his sister in Ewa. She has two children and sells tea and coffee. She would like to migrate, if she had the chance, to help her children have a better education and a better life. But she does not have the opportunity because her family is impoverished, initially due to the armed conflict and then because of all the expenses she incurred to bring back her children who tried to migrate irregularly and were caught. After she and their father divorced, the children were persuaded to migrate and ended up “in the hands of wrong individuals” who smuggled them by sea. Also, she has no support from the traditional economic aid associations such as iqub and idir, since, having no money, she cannot contribute to these associations. So, for now, migration remains a plan in her life that cannot be realized.

3.2.3. Segment 3: Frustrated Returnees in Migrating Households

Segment 3 is the smallest in the Ethiopia sample—11% of respondents—but the most distinctive. These individuals stand apart not because they aspire to migrate, but because they already have. Most are returnees from international labor migration—primarily to the Gulf—who came back after being deported, imprisoned, or experiencing severe exploitation. What defines them now is not the absence of aspiration, but a cycle of attempted mobility, harsh experience, and constrained return. Although they are marked by lingering aspiration, their capabilities have been eroded by trauma, economic loss, and institutional failure.

This segment is demographically distinct. It is the youngest (mean age: 33.1), most male (79.2%), and most educated (mean 4.04 years) group in the sample. They live in smaller households (average size: 5.1), are least likely to be partnered (76.5%), and are overwhelmingly concentrated in Ewa (80.8%)—a district affected more by climate stress and post-return hardship than by direct armed conflict. Unlike Segment 2 respondents, who are more concentrated in Chifra, Segment 3 households face the compounding effects of migration failure, economic instability, and environmental degradation. Their narratives reflect direct engagement with mobility—often through irregular means—and the consequences of that choice.

> *"I went to Saudi Arabia in 2013, worked for seven months, and got deported to Ethiopia after serving six months in prison. I learned that I was exploited without benefit. I now believe that I can improve my life by working hard here."*
>
> Woman, Ewa

Others speak through the experiences of their children—emphasizing the cost of unsuccessful migration attempts on the entire household:

> *"In the past, my child went to Saudi Arabia but returned without working there. He was caught and deported after paying 60,000 birr [about € 395] for his release."*
>
> Man, Ewa

Some offer detailed accounts of the risk and trauma involved in irregular routes, underscoring the emotional toll that remains even years later:

> *"I went there on a boat illegally. After working for around 3 years, I was caught, imprisoned, and then deported at the end of 2016. Now I am jobless. No one advised me to go; I went there due to the problems that I had at that time. The journey in the boat is full of stress; even the naval forces could have forcefully capsized our boat if they had found us."*
>
> Woman, Ewa

Despite prior mobility, this segment is still actively involved in survival-based livelihoods. They remain largely agropastoral (84.3%) and report higher household asset scores and greater access to financial services

(16.9%) than others. Yet these material gains are fragile—undermined by loss, trauma, and disconnection from sustainable support.

Their capacity to act on aspiration has been interrupted. Many prepared to remigrate, saved funds, or secured documents—only to be blocked again by war, climate events, or economic collapse.

> *"After serving a two-year sentence in Saudi Arabia, I returned to Ethiopia. When I returned, there was no job here for me. Covid-19 and the two-year war affected me a lot. I used to do agriculture work. After I went there, the farm was taken away by flood. I used to have some money but I was forced to pay it in Yemen. Then, I became empty handed. Now, there is no job and I have no energy to work."*
>
> Man, Ewa

Others are open to internal migration if support and skills training are available—indicating flexible but unfulfilled aspiration.

> *"In Saudi, I worked as a shepherd. Here, in recent times, the drought has reduced the livestock in this area. Because of the conflict with Amahara, we couldn't trade our livestock. If I had the skills, I would be willing to move to Oromia or Amhara or elsewhere in Ethiopia. If someone gives me relevant skill training, I am willing to live and work in any town in Ethiopia."*
>
> Man, Ewa

Interestingly, this segment reports the highest levels of trust in public institutions (mean 2.78) and the strongest expectations for improved services, suggesting a cautious but notable openness to re-engagement. These may reflect contact with government or NGO returnee programs—or simply a strategic hope that institutions will be better the second time around. The scars of migration are gendered. Men frame their frustrations in terms of missed opportunity and economic reversal. Women describe coercion, confinement, and exploitation, even when migration was technically legal.

> *"I went there using legal means. Yet, I had to work for three years and a few months at a household. This means it has some element of 'jail', as the masters do not allow us to move, use phones, or make contact with anyone we know. So, after serving them for 3 years and four months, I left their house and worked for others for an additional seven years. Then, I was caught by soldiers and came here."*
>
> Woman, Ewa

Others frame their return in terms of economic devastation—describing remittances that were lost or stolen, compounding the trauma of forced return.

> *"I stayed there for 9 years taking care of camels. I used to send money to my brother who then opened a shop with the money. Unfortunately the shop was looted during the war. The loss we incurred was in millions of birr [1 million birr was approximately € 6,500 . I still believe that I could get that money as I made it before."*
>
> Man, Ewa

These are not aspirants dreaming in the abstract. They are former migrants living with the weight of having tried—and failed. They are not blocked by fear or family. They are blocked by exhaustion, by repeated shocks, and by the erosion of confidence in mobility as a solution.

Narrative Profile: Hayatu

Hayatu went to Saudi Arabia three times between 2006 and 2012. He used the Somaliland and the Djibouti route. The journeys were very difficult, especially the Somaliland one (36 hours on boat); the Djibouti route was somehow easier (only 6 hours on boat). He suffered from lack of food and water. After so many problems on the road and in the life that he led in Saudi Arabia, he concluded that he did not get any benefits from migration and, on the contrary, ran many risks. He learned that it is better to work in his own country, where he lives with his wife and runs a store. He admits that sometimes he gets frustrated in his job or angry with the government because he thinks the taxes he pays are excessive. But even so, he prefers to stay in his country and concentrate on growing his store.

Narrative Profile: Ali

Ali is a man living in Ewa. He is a returnee from Saudi Arabia. He began an irregular migration journey in the hope of improving his family's living conditions. However, he was caught along the way in Yemen, and his parents were forced to sell two camels to secure his release. Then, after entering Saudi Arabia, he managed to work for about five months before being apprehended by the Saudi authorities and imprisoned in the Yidida prison center for two years. After serving his sentence and returning to Ethiopia, he struggles to find employment. His neighbors and relatives offer him some assistance, and he has tried to engage in agriculture. However, a lack of equipment has made it difficult. He applied for a government loan to purchase an irrigation motor pump but was not successful. Despite these challenges, he does not consider migrating abroad again. He cannot afford the cost of regular migration and no longer wishes to migrate irregularly, being aware of the dangers. So, he stays in Ewa and occasionally earns a daily wage of about 100 birr (less than one euro) by collecting onions on other people's farms.

This segment reveals how mobility, once attempted, can evolve into a different kind of immobility, one not anchored by caregiving (Segment 1) nor paralyzed by isolation (Segment 2), but stalled by failure, loss, and exhaustion. These are aspirants turned returnees. Their aspirations are real, though weakened. Their experiences are costly. For them, to stay now is not to settle, but to recover.

3.3. The logics behind aspirations and capabilities in Ethiopia

Staying in Afar is not a singular act, but a differentiated outcome of intersecting forces: climate pressure, conflict exposure, household roles, migration experience, and institutional breakdown. While Section 3.2 identified three distinct segments—Acquiescent and Instrumental Stayees, Isolated Aspirants, and Frustrated Returnees—this section steps back to identify the cross-cutting logics that explain how aspiration and capability interact across groups. These insights reveal not only who stays, but why, and under what evolving horizon of possibility.

3.3.1. Aspirations Across Life Stages and Livelihood Collapse

Across all segments, aspiration is structured by age, especially as it relates to education and economic transition. Segment 1 respondents are the oldest and least educated, with the lowest asset base. Their aspirations are often rechanneled into local goals such as caring for children, running micro-businesses, or improving shelter. Migration is not actively rejected, but becomes irrelevant given their household responsibilities and resource constraints.

Segment 2 respondents are slightly younger and more educated. They express clear individual aspirations to migrate, especially if provided legal documentation, but remain embedded in households that do not share or support those aspirations. This misalignment creates frustration: migration is imagined but blocked by family vetoes, gender roles, or lack of preparation.

Segment 3 respondents are the youngest and most educated, and most have international migration experience. Their aspirations have already been acted upon, often through risky irregular channels. Many returned with trauma, lost savings, or imprisonment. Their stories reflect not only recalibrated aspiration but caution rooted in experience. Some remain hopeful about remigration through legal channels; others shift their ambition toward rebuilding life locally. In all cases, education emerges as a key enabler, not only of aspiration but of the capacity to evaluate and revise it.

3.3.2. Gender, Care Work, and Interdependent Staying

Immobility in Afar is rarely an individual decision - it is relational. Across segments, women report caregiving as a core constraint. In Segment 1, they stay to raise grandchildren or care for disabled parents. In Segment 2, women hesitate to migrate without a husband or brother, citing religious expectations. Even in Segment 3, returnee women report that gendered labor—especially domestic servitude—shaped their vulnerability abroad and limited their choices upon return.

Men, meanwhile, frame staying around protection and provisioning. Some remain to support relatives, while others describe being excluded from migration plans made by siblings. For both genders, staying is not always about what they want, but about what others need. The household becomes a site of interdependency—where mobility is deferred because of care, cohesion, or survival demands.

3.3.3. Return, Remigration, and the Weight of Migration Trauma

Segment 3 reveals the powerful impact of failed or traumatic migration. Many respondents undertook irregular journeys to Gulf countries—via Djibouti, Somalia, Somaliland, or Yemen. Some were imprisoned, others abused or exploited, and most returned empty-handed. These experiences reframe migration as a gamble with high emotional and financial costs.

Returnees in this segment describe a condition of suspended re-mobility: they want to try again but lack the documentation, money, or trust to do so. Some no longer consider migration viable, despite continued hardship. These individuals are not uninformed or passive.

They are aspirants re-shaped by failure, now navigating a narrow possibility—too experienced to try again blindly, but too constrained to leave safely.

3.3.4. Climate Erosion, Loss of Adaptation, and Sedentarization

The climate crisis in Afar is not a future risk. The collapse is already underway. Pastoralism, once the dominant livelihood, is unraveling due to drought, shrinking grazing land, and water scarcity. Segment 1 respondents—especially older men—describe being "forced to settle" after livestock loss. Segment 2 includes many households transitioning from agropastoralism to precarious informal labor. Even in Segment 3, some returnees abandoned pastoral work due to climate stress or conflict, only to find no viable alternatives upon return.

This erosion of adaptive mobility has triggered a wave of sedentarization in which movement, once essential for survival, is now blocked by both environmental degradation and household obligation. Economic collapse and pastoral decline are central to understanding how aspiration is shaped by place, risk, and livelihood loss.

3.3.5. Households as Sites of Negotiated Immobility

Across all three segments, the household operates as a space of negotiation through which aspirations are enabled, deferred, or redefined through shared roles and relational obligations. Migration decisions are rarely made alone. They unfold via household dynamics shaped by duty, risk, gender, and generational hierarchy.

In Segment 1, staying is a quiet resolution. Respondents, often widowed women or elder

caregivers, do not leave because they hold the household together through their caregiving. In Segment 2, individuals aspire to migrate but face household resistance. Parents discourage risk. Women await accompaniment, while young men wait their "turn." These respondents negotiate from within the household, seeking alignment that has not yet come. In Segment 3, many respondents migrated as part of household strategies—whether to earn money, support relatives, or invest in assets. Their return often reflects the failure of those plans and forces a rethinking of roles, responsibilities, and whether to try migrating again.

What cuts across segments is that immobility is not simply a constraint. It is a negotiated outcome over who stays, why, and for whom. In Afar, the household is not just a barrier or launchpad. Rather, it is the setting in which mobility is imagined, contested, and lived.

3.3.6. Systemic Disconnection and the Erosion of Enabling Structures

Immobility in Afar is not only about aspiration or constraint. It is about structural detachment. Many respondents lack identification documents (such as national digital identification or passport), access to financial services, or institutional support. Only a quarter of survey respondents understood the benefits of Ethiopia's national digital ID system (Fayda), which is being expanded as a tool for financial access and service delivery. Awareness was notably higher among IDP returnees who had to use proof-of-identity documents to access humanitarian assistance.

Without IDs, people cannot open bank accounts, access mobile money, or qualify for legal migration. Without documentation, returnees face new barriers to reintegration. This systemic exclusion deepens existing inequalities and compounds immobility. Aspirations become harder to act on not because they fade, but because the scaffolding of possibility—identity, access, trust—is missing.

3.4. Program and Policy Recommendations in Ethiopia

3.4.1. Program Recommendations

3.4.1.1. Invest in Household Resilience for Care-Anchored Stayees

The largest group in the Ethiopia sample, Segment 1, consists of individuals who stay because they are responsible for the care and survival of their household. Often women—especially older women—with limited income and education, these Care-Anchored Stayees remain in place due to caregiving obligations and structural isolation, not a lack of aspiration. Reducing this burden requires integrated social and economic engagement. Community- and household-level interventions can promote awareness and redistribution of care roles, while expanding

access to essential services—such as childcare, water, and tailored financial products—that reduce the overwhelming demands on women's time. Broader support for women, and for youth where relevant, should include expanded livelihood options beyond agropastoralism, through vocational training, digital skills development, entrepreneurship hubs, and gender-aware employment initiatives. Strengthening local women- and youth-led Savings and Credit Cooperatives (SACCOs) can also improve access to capital and build resilience. Recognizing and supporting caregiving not only affirms staying as a stabilizing force—it also creates pathways for inclusion, agency, and economic security..

3.4.1.2. Support Aspirational Youth with Economic Pathways and Migration Preparedness

Segment 2 includes younger, slightly more educated, and more digitally connected individuals who express high aspirations to migrate but face household vetoes, limited financial access, and a lack of reliable information. They are not passively immobile. Rather, they are frustrated. Addressing their needs requires coordinated effort from government, development actors, and civil society. Stakeholders should work to expand local opportunity while also supporting safe, informed migration pathways. This includes fostering mindset shifts among youth and communities about the value of local opportunities and the risks of irregular migration.

Practical interventions may include access to inclusive financial services tailored to youth needs, skills-building aligned with local labor markets, and strengthened one-stop centers that provide up-to-date information on employment, training, and entrepreneurship options. Vocational and technical training centers should revise or develop gender-inclusive curricula and offer short-term, market-relevant courses, including those targeting international labor markets when legal pathways are in place.

> Migration decisions are rarely made alone. They unfold via household dynamics shaped by duty, risk, gender, and generational hierarchy

Youth should be supported to organize into small and micro enterprises, with training in technical and entrepreneurial skills, access to markets, and linkages to business development services. Integrated gender and gender-based violence (GBV) awareness efforts—targeting women, households, communities, and local authorities—are also essential.

Finally, stakeholders must foster stronger collaboration to align services and expand employment opportunities, while advancing advocacy and policy influence to ensure that youth aspirations are visible, supported, and met—whether through dignified local engagement or safe, voluntary migration.

3.4.1.3. Strengthen Reintegration and Trauma Recovery for Frustrated Returnees

Segment 3 respondents are largely returnees from international labor migration—often deported or repatriated after experiences of abuse, detention, or exploitation. Their households frequently orchestrated these past migrations and now struggle to absorb the emotional and economic aftermath of failure. Non-governmental development organizations can contribute to a more dignified reintegration by offering gender-sensitive trauma-informed programming, psychosocial support, ID recovery, and small business or cooperative seed capital for returnees and their families. Partnering with kebele leaders, community groups, and federal and regional government partners can help returnees regain a sense of purpose, rebuild trust in local systems, and make staying a viable and dignified option rather than a source of shame.

3.4.1.4. Leverage Climate Adaptation as a Platform for Stability in Place

Across all three segments, climate degradation—particularly the collapse of agropastoral livelihoods—is a critical factor shaping immobility. For older residents in Segment 1, this has meant the loss of adaptive mobility. For youth in Segment 2, it constrains aspirations. And for returnees in Segment 3, it blocks the recovery of livelihoods upon return. Government, civil society actors, and development and humanitarian partners should explicitly include those who have stopped moving due to climate stress in their programming and work to strengthen their adaptive capacity. This includes promoting climate-smart and resilient practices, skill-building on good agricultural techniques, improved access to agricultural inputs and irrigation, financial inclusion, natural resource management, and value chain development. Together, these efforts can diversify livelihoods, build household and community resilience to climate shocks, and make staying in place a more viable and secure option.

3.4.1.5. Reframe Staying as a Contribution, Not a Failure

Across all segments, staying is often interpreted socially as a sign of loss, failure, or abandonment—especially for youth and returnees. Non-governmental development organizations can challenge this narrative through storytelling programs, radio campaigns, and school-based youth and gender dialogues that elevate the value of those who remain. Platforms for returnees, caregivers, and youth to share their strategies for staying—whether through care, economic reinvention, or adaptation—can shift the discourse. Celebrating local anchoring and survival is not about discouraging migration; it is about positioning immobility as a healthy and legitimate life choice worthy of support.

3.4.2. Policy Recommendations

3.4.2.1. Recognize Immobility as a Meaningful Outcome in Mobility, Displacement, and Development Policy

In Ethiopia, immobility remains invisible within migration and development frameworks. Yet, this study shows that people stay not out of inertia but because of layered structural constraints—gender roles, caregiving, conflict, and failed return. National migration policy and disaster risk strategies should explicitly recognize immobility as a valid mobility outcome requiring tailored support. This means including immobile populations in early warning systems, service planning, and durable solutions strategies alongside displaced and mobile groups in contexts of prolonged crises.

3.4.3.2. Expand Community-Based ID Recovery and Legal Documentation Services

A critical barrier across segments—especially for returnees—is the lack of formal identification, which blocks access to services, land rights, and (re)migration pathways. Ethiopia's Fayda digital ID system offers a promising foundation, but awareness remains low. Few understood its benefits, with higher awareness among IDP returnees who use it as proof of displacement. The World Bank's support for Fayda highlights its potential to unlock inclusive services[1]. Development and humanitarian actors should invest in mobile ID recovery services, legal aid, and civic education to ensure that immobility is not compounded by institutional invisibility.

3.4.3.3. Design Gender-Responsive Social Protection

Women disproportionately shoulder the burdens of care-related immobility, especially in Segment 1. Yet Ethiopia's social protection schemes rarely recognize or address these gendered constraints. Programs should adopt flexible, care-sensitive designs—such as options for home-based participation, reduced-hour alternatives, or caregiver stipends. Rural cash transfer programs should also consider household migration strategies, ensuring that families are not penalized for having immobile members. Expanding eligibility criteria, tailoring benefits to caregiving contexts, and integrating gender-aware targeting mechanisms are key. In addition, gender-inclusive services tailored to local realities—such as mobile financial services, mobile health care, and mobile education delivery—can significantly ease the constraints faced by immobile women. Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) offers a critical entry point for piloting and scaling these adaptations in ways that affirm caregiving as a social contribution.

3.4.3.4. Develop a Reintegration Strategy for Returnees

Returnees face stigma, economic hardship, and lack of formal support. For many, this produces long-term immobility—rooted not in preference but in failed migration and eroded capabilities. Ethiopia needs a coordinated reintegration strategy that includes mental health services, livelihood restart packages, legal aid, and formal recognition of migration experiences. Reintegration should be viewed not only as a humanitarian res-

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1. World Bank, "The Transformative Power of Ethiopia's Digital ID: Unlocking a Better Future for All," World Bank, February 27, 2025, accessed June 8, 2025, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2025/02/27/the-transformative-power-of-ethiopia-afe-digital-id-unlocking-a-better-future-for-all

ponse but as a development opportunity, enabling returnees to become anchors of stability in their communities.

3.4.3.5. Align Climate Adaptation Policy with Immobility Needs

National climate strategies often assume mobility and migration as adaptation, planned relocation, or forced displacement. Yet, this study shows that many affected by climate shocks are staying, either by necessity, low capacity or lack of support for planned relocation. Ethiopia's adaptation frameworks should explicitly address the needs of those who remain: restoring agropastoral livelihoods, investing in drought-resistant infrastructure, and protecting sedentarizing communities at risk of permanent loss.

Graph 2. Segmentation Visualization in Ethiopia

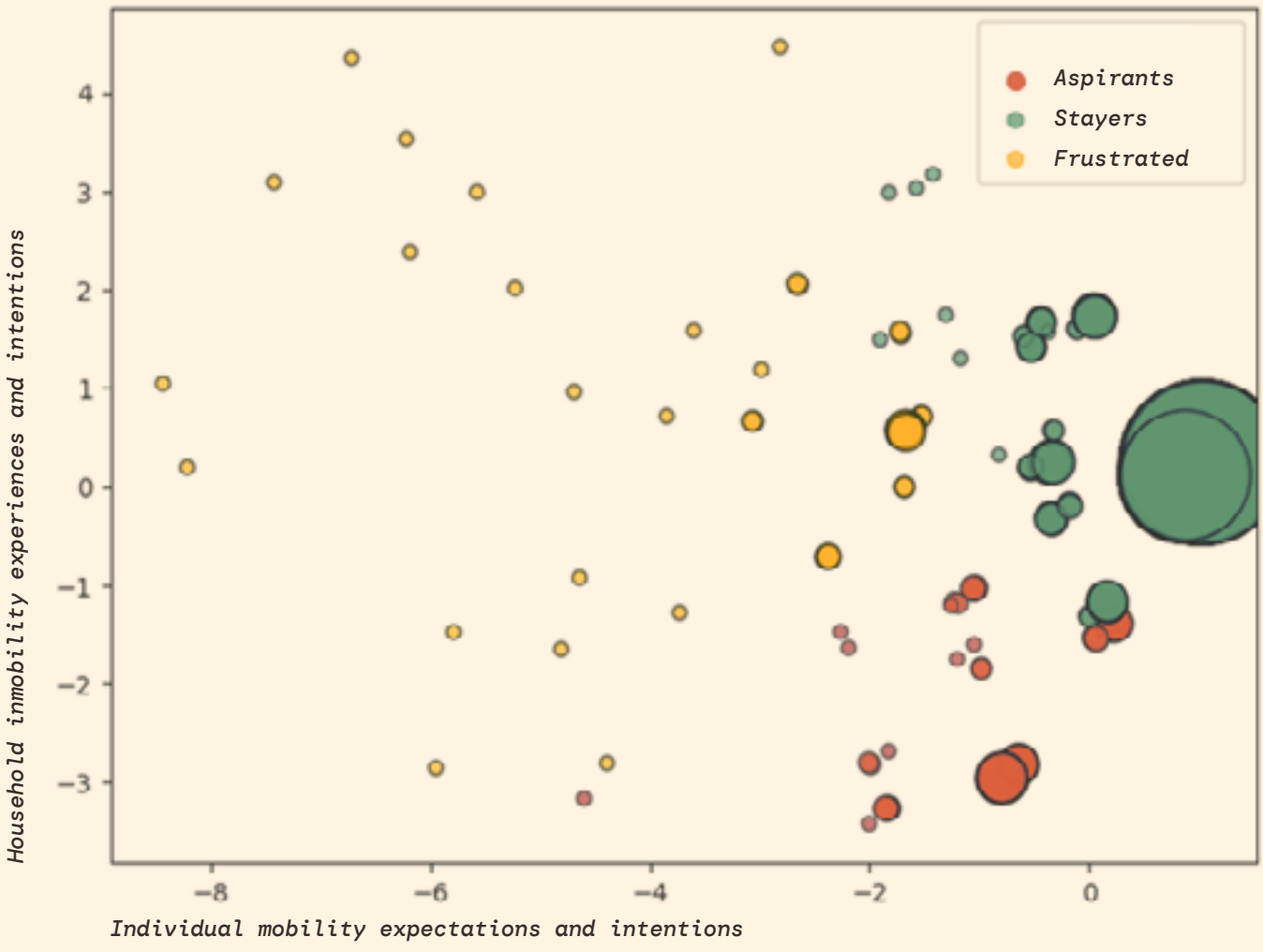

Table 4. Aspirations in Ethiopia

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Segment 3: Frustrated	Significance Comparison	Overall
Segment Size	75%	14%	11%		
Individual (% Stay)					
Did not prepare to leave country in last 5 years	Very High (97%)	Very High (84%)	Medium (60%)	a	91%
Did not consider leaving country last 12 months	Very High (99%)	Very High (100%)	Low (28%)	a, b, c	91%
Did not consider leaving community last 12 months	Very High (97%)	Very High (86%)	Very Low (16%)	a, b, c	86%
Would like to stay	Very High (100%)	Low (21%)	Medium (51%)	a	83%
Even if given documents, would stay in country	Very High (99%)	Low (33%)	High (67%)	a, b, c	86%
Think will still be here in 5 years	Medium (60%)	Medium (55%)	Medium (51%)		58%
Household (% Stay)					
You or someone in household did not leave last 5 years	Very High (97%)	Very High (100%)	High (64%)	b, c	94%
Nobody close (family or friend) left last 5 years	Very High (97%)	Very High (100%)	High (73%)	b	95%
You or someone in household do not migrate cyclically	Very High (99%)	Very High (98%)	High (71%)	b	95%
Nobody in your household wants to leave	Very High (99%)	Very High (100%)	Very High (84%)	b	98%

Note: Significance comparison indicates a difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a: segment1 and segment2, b: segment 1 and segment 3, and c: segment 2 and segment 3.

Table 5. Characteristics and Capabilities in Ethiopia

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Segment 3: Frustrated	Significance Comparison
Demographics (Respondent)				
Sex: Female	61.0%	53.0%	20.8%	b, c
Age (Mean)	38.3	34.6	33.1	a, b
Education (Years)	1.83	3.47	4.04	a, b
Civil Status: With Partner	86.8%	95.4%	78.7%	c
Woreda: Ewa (vs. Chifra)	52.9%	37.4%	80.8%	a, b, c
Household Structure and Livelihood				
Household Members (Mean)	6.75	7.58	5.10	a, b, c
Household Assets (Index 0 to 1)	0.10	0.12	0.22	b, c
Agropastoral Livelihood	84.6%	73.2%	84.3%	a
Main income source: Informal	0.9%	2.0%	0.1%	c
Main income source: Formal	7.0%	2.1%	3.2%	c
Domestic Work Hours (Weekly, Mean)	29.02	36.83	30.93	a
Remunerated Work Hours (Weekly, Mean)	31.17	23.39	30.45	a, c
Financial Product Use	2.7%	3.9%	16.9%	b
Care Responsibility (Children, Elderly)	53.5%	29.3%	54.2%	a, c
Health Status (Respondent)				
Expected Health & Education (1 to 3)	1.54	1.41	1.68	a, b, c

Physical Health (good and very good)	57.79%	77.10%	44.25%	a, b, c
Generalized Anxiety (Screened)	9.8%	8.0%	7.8%	
Conflict and Stress (Household)				
Water Conflict	39.3%	34.8%	51.0%	
Land Conflict	46.4%	39.3%	43.8%	
Climate Stress	96.4%	96.5%	82.2%	b, c
Security Issues (mean 1 to 4)	2.41	2.51	2.34	
Violence Experienced	52.7%	28.7%	85.6%	a, b, c
Trust (Mean 1 to 4): Government	2.91	2.92	3.17	
Mobility Status and Knowledge				
Status: International Labor Migrant	5.3%	0.0%	58.1%	b
Status: IDP Returnee	51.4%	48.6%	21.9%	b
Status: Stayees	43.4%	51.4%	20.0%	b
Migration Knowledge (Index 0 to 1)	0.08	0.09	0.54	b, c

Note: Significance comparison indicates a difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a: segment 1 and segment2, b: segment 1 and segment 3, and c: segment 2 and segment 3.

Table 6. Immobility Subtypes in Ethiopia

Subtype	Segment	Core Logic	Aspiration Level	Capabilities	Typical Profile
Care-Entrenched Guardians	Segment 1: Acquiescent and Instrumental Stayees	Staying framed by caregiving responsibility and constraint	Low	Low	Widowed or elder women heading large households, agropastoral livelihoods, low access to services
Protective Household Anchors	Segment 1: Acquiescent and Instrumental Stayees	Staying as duty to protect land, assets, and household	Low or redirected	Low	Men guarding property or family in peripheral kebeles, facing climate or conflict trauma
Constrained Aspirants in Passive Households	Segment 2: Isolated Aspirants in Immobile Households	Aspiration blocked by intra-household opposition and lack of support	High (individual), low (household)	Low	Young or middle-aged adults, often women, imagining migration without family backing
Tethered Mothers and Postponed Migrants	Segment 2: Isolated Aspirants in Immobile Households	Migration seen as desirable but inaccessible due to gender, religion, and poverty	High	Low	Women with dependent children or religious constraints, living in conflict-affected areas
Frustrated Returnees	Segment 3: Frustrated Returnees in Migrating Households	Immobility after failed migration due to deportation or trauma	Moderate	Declining	Former Gulf migrants, facing economic loss, social dislocation, and no viable re-migration
Cautious Stabilizers	Segment 3: Frustrated Returnees in Migrating Households	Choosing to remain after migration loss, with conditional hope	Low to moderate	Low to moderate	Returnees with some assets or trust in institutions, building lives around limited stability

4.
Colombia: Immobility in the Valle de Cauca

4.1. Introduction

4.1.1. Colombia Immobility Context

Colombia is a country defined by layered and overlapping patterns of displacement and immobility. Due to ongoing armed conflict, as of 2023, nearly 6.9 million people were internally displaced, making Colombia one of the countries with the highest IDP populations globally. That year alone, nearly 55,000 individuals were newly displaced, with 17 departments experiencing mass forced displacement.[1] The departments most affected included Nariño, Chocó, Valle del Cauca, Antioquia, Cauca, and Bolívar. In parallel, incidents of forced confinement—where communities are unable to move due to threats from armed actors—affected over 66,000 people, with Chocó, Putumayo, and Nariño bearing the brunt[2]. Traditional urban centers such as Cali, Buenaventura, Bogotá, and Medellín continue to be destinations for displaced populations, though smaller municipalities like Zambrano, Buenavista, and San Calixto are increasingly hosting displaced people as well.[3]

Colombia's migration landscape, however, stretches beyond internal displacement. By the end of 2023, the country was host to the third-largest population of refugees and people in need of international protection worldwide—including 2.9 million Venezuelans and over 500,000 Colombian returnees who had previously sought asylum in Venezuela. Meanwhile, 113,500 Colombians were registered as refugees globally, with around 300,000 Colombian asylum seekers, mostly within the Americas. Ecuador hosted the largest number of Colombian refugees, followed by Venezuela, Canada, the United States, and Spain.[4]

Colombia also functions as a major transit corridor, particularly for those travelling northward. In 2023, more than 520,000 migrants and refugees crossed the country en route to Panama via the Darién Gap, mark-

1. Norwegian Refugee Council, "Colombia's Victims Day: Alarming Figures Underscore Ongoing Conflict," April 9, 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/colombia/colombias-victims-day-alarming-figures-underscore-ongoing-conflict

2. Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia, "Durante el 2023 en Colombia, cerca de 121.000 personas fueron víctimas de desplazamiento forzado masivo y confinamiento," January 21, 2024, https://defensoria.gov.co/-/durante-el-2023-en-colombia-cerca-de-121.000-personas-fueron-v%C3%ADctimas-de-desplazamiento-forzado-masivo-y-confinamiento.

3. Unidad para las Víctimas, Informe de desplazamiento forzado en el primer semestre de 2023 (2023), https://datospaz.unidadvictimas.gov.co/archivos/datosPaz/INFORME%20DESPLAZAMIENTO%202023_VF2.pdf

4. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Colombia Situation: Overview 2023, June 18, 2024, https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/situations/colombia-situation.

ing an unprecedented surge. These mixed movements were led by Venezuelans (63%), followed by Ecuadorians (10%), Haitians (9%), Chinese (5%), and individuals from over 100 other nationalities.[5] Colombia's geography, infrastructure, and crisis proximity have made it a pivotal space for regional human mobility—whether as a point of entry, transit, return, or refuge.

But amid this mobility, many also stay—some by decision, many by constraint. Rudolf argues that forced immobility, like displacement, constitutes a form of uprooting and harm, especially for those immobilized after an initial movement.[6] His mixed-methods research in Colombia led to a broader model of displacement that includes immobile individuals as victims of structurally enforced stasis. Similarly, Thornton et al. analyze governance responses to both voluntary and involuntary immobility in the face of environmental and climate change, emphasizing the need for policies that allow people to remain when desired and support those who cannot move.7 Vélez-Echeverri, drawing on a qualitative study in La Playita, el Pacífico, and Providencia, shows how environmental risk, poverty, and the unaffordability of formal housing shape mobility decisions.[8] In such contexts, communities balance the risks of moving against the vulnerabilities of staying.

Together, these dynamics reveal that immobility in Colombia is not a marginal phenomenon. It is deeply embedded in a national context of armed conflict, inequality, and environmental precarity. For many, staying is neither fully voluntary nor entirely constrained—but a negotiated position within fragile personal and structural landscapes. This chapter recognizes this complexity and immobility as a legitimate and often under-acknowledged form of displacement, resilience, and survival.

4.1.2. Site Selection: Cali and Cauca

The decision to conduct fieldwork in Cali and Cauca was based on their strategic relevance to Colombia's complex immobility landscape and to Ayuda en Acción's operational presence. Cali is one of the main urban destinations for internally displaced persons and displaced Venezuelans in Colombia. Positioned along the Pacific migration corridor, Cali plays a dual role: it is both a site of reception and a waypoint for those continuing their journeys north. These overlapping layers of migration, displacement, return, and transit converge within the city's urban peripheries, particularly in Comunas 1 and 2, where

5. Ibid.

6. Markus Rudolf, Immobilisation, Restricted Spatial Mobility and Displacement in Violent Conflict: Humanitarian Needs of Confined Communities in Colombia, BICC Working Paper 1/2020 (Bonn: Bonn International Center for Conversion, 2020), https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-68081-7

7. Fanny Thornton, Diogo Andreolla Serraglio, and Alec Thornton, "Trapped or Staying Put: Governing Immobility in the Context of Climate Change," Frontiers in Climate 5 (2023), https://doi.org/10.3389/fclim.2023.1092264

8. Juliana Vélez-Echeverri, A Risk-Based Approach to Legal Mobilisation: A Case Study of Communities Experiencing Climate-Related (Im)mobility in Colombia (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2023), https://doi.org/10.48683/1926.00114663

Ayuda en Acción implements programs on youth leadership, livelihood development, and peacebuilding. Cali's urban dynamics, concentration of services, and population diversity made it a critical site to examine the multiple configurations of immobility—both voluntary and constrained—under conditions of density, precarity, and institutional presence.

In contrast, Cauca represents a rural context with a long-standing history of armed conflict, environmental vulnerability, and chronic institutional neglect. Many of its municipalities, including those in the northern and Pacific regions, continue to face threats from armed actors, land dispossession, and climate-related risks. These conditions have generated both high levels

of internal displacement and constrained forms of staying, often shaped by caregiving responsibilities, household roles, and historical trauma. Ayuda en Acción's long-term engagement in rural Cauca, including its work with informal workers, community organizations, and displaced families, provided a critical foundation for identifying populations often overlooked in policy and programming. Together, Cali and Cauca allow for a comparative understanding of how immobility manifests across urban and rural settings, between strategic planning and enforced stillness, and within households navigating care, violence, aspiration, and fatigue. These sites reflect the diversity of the Colombian experience and allow the study to capture both visible and invisible forms of staying.

4.1.3. Local Methodology

Following the shared methodology, the Colombia team adapted each phase to examine how aspirations and capabilities are shaped by the legacies of internal displacement, persistent insecurity, and limited state presence.

Two focus groups—one in Cali and one in Cauca—helped to validate the factors associated with staying and going, ensuring that local perspectives informed the structure and language of the survey instrument.

The household survey reached 427 respondents—250 in Cali and 177 in Cauca—with an attempt to balance between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and long-settled residents. The survey was conducted by an independent survey firm, with Ayuda en Acción staff supporting respondent recruitment and providing logistical coordination in the field. Participants were recruited through two main channels: (i) by inviting current program beneficiaries and encouraging each to refer a non-beneficiary household from their neighborhood; and (ii) by engaging beneficiaries through local partner NGOs. Respondents received a small incentive in the form of a voucher redeemable at a local store as compensation for their time. This approach enabled comparative analysis of those uprooted by conflict and those who never left but live in similarly high-risk conditions. Using Latent Class Analysis, the team identified distinct immobility profiles based on migration aspirations, household roles, and past displacement or mobility experiences.

Twenty-three in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals drawn from both Cali and Cauca, selected to represent variation in region, gender, and age across the main aspiration profiles—those who expressed a desire to stay and those who wished to leave. This approach allowed the team to explore how aspirations interact with local context and household roles. These interviews offered deeper insight into how people define their immobility options.

4.2. Types of immobility in Colombia

This chapter identifies six subtypes of immobility in Colombia, grouped into two overarching segments. The latent class analysis that underpins this typology identified a sharp divide between those with low desire or preparation to migrate and

those whose aspirations are present but whose capabilities are fragmented. This segmentation was built on both individual and household-level indicators, including migration intent, hypothetical choices if unconstrained, past household mobility, and alignment or tension around plans to stay or leave.

Segment 1 includes individuals with low migration aspirations and relatively stable, if modest, household circumstances—many of whom stay due to caregiving responsibilities, past migration recalibration, or localized life-building. These are Care-Entrenched Stayers, Settled Returnees, and Satisfied Strategists: people whose decision to remain reflects commitment, relational duty, or strategic anchoring rather than constraint alone. Segment 2, by contrast, includes those with high or urgent aspirations to leave, but who remain immobilized by structural, emotional, or institutional barriers. These are Strategic Aspirants preparing to migrate cautiously, Constrained Aspirants who are blocked by caregiving or household dynamics, and Trauma-Driven Stayees immobilized by past displacement, violence, or systemic abandonment.

What emerges is not a binary between movers and non-movers, but a textured spectrum of immobility—ranging from chosen and anchored, to aspirational and deferred, to urgent yet obstructed. Across both segments, staying is not static. It is structured by caregiving, age, gender, prior migration, institutional trust, and experiences of violence or abandonment. Immobility in Colombia is not the absence of ambition but a reconfiguration of what is possible. For some, staying is a deliberate act of care, recovery, or strategy. For others, it is a state of pressured waiting or quiet resignation. These differentiated logics of staying underscore the need to recognize immobility as a critical site of humanitarian and development intervention—one that reflects not inertia, but lived negotiation within deeply uneven landscapes of opportunity and constraint.

4.2.1. Segment 1: Rooted, Carebound, or Reoriented

The first segment includes individuals who exhibit consistently low aspiration to migrate across time. In this segment, over 87% report that their household plans to stay. Nearly all say they have never considered leaving, are not currently thinking about it, and would choose to remain even if they had legal pathways or resources. This segment reflects a narrow but tangible capability to stay. Many have housing and basic services, but lack the mobility capital—networks, savings, or legal pathways—that would allow them to act on distant aspirations. The absence of acute crisis opens space for other logics to govern personal and household decisions: care, continuity and forward planning.

Statistically, they are older on average (51.7 years), have lower formal education (8.7 years), and are less connected to formal employment (21.6%). Yet they report higher financial satisfaction (2.98 on a scale from 1 to 5, vs. 2.69 in Segment 2), greater household asset ownership (0.65 on a scale from

0 to 1, vs. 0.64 Segment 2), and lower exposure to violence (27.6% vs. 54.1% in Segment 2), and environmental shocks (59.3% vs. 48.2% in Segment 2) compared to the second segment. Psychologically, households in this group appear steadier: generalized anxiety disorder rates are significantly lower (21.6% vs. 30.6% in Segment 2), and household conflict is less frequent (62.75% vs. 72.5% in Segment 2).

Within this group lie three distinct logics of staying. Some stay because they do not want to leave their families behind, because of either caregiving responsibilities or a deep emotional bond. Others have recalibrated their aspirations after past migration experiences. A third group pauses aspirations by investing in local opportunities. These three subgroups show how the relationship between aspiration and capability produces immobility just as much as it fosters movement. The profiles that follow show that staying is not passive. In three different ways, it is chosen.

4.2.1.1. Subtype A: Care-Entrenched Stayers: Staying for Others and for Themselves

Some people stay because no one else can. Care-Entrenched Stayers are bound by caregiving—looking after children with illnesses, elderly parents, or relatives with disabilities. These respondents rarely mention migration, not because they are unaware of it, but because they cannot imagine leaving those who depend on them. For some, the emotional bond with their families is so strong that they would not even consider leaving; their deep sense of family attachment keeps them rooted in place.

Ximena, a 30-year-old woman in Cauca who lives with her mom and cares for her daughter with cardiopathy and her sister who suffers from schizophrenia, put it plainly:

> *"I would like to go to other places, but since my daughter is sick... you live in constant worry: 'Who is going to help my mom? And my daughter? Oh, how is my family doing?' You would feel homesick, and you can't just leave like that."*
>
> (Woman,Cauca)

A logic of staying emerged mainly among women in rural Cauca, particularly those over age 40. Overall, Segment 1 —where this subgroup is concentrated—shows a statistically significant profile of older age (51.7 years), low formal employment (21.6%), and intensive caregiving: nearly half live with someone over 60 (44%). They are also less digitally connected (30%), and have lower average educational attainment (8.7 years).

> *While predominantly female, this subtype is not exclusive to women. Freddy, 45, cares for his teenage daughter in Cauca. "I'm very attached to my family," he explained. "It would be very hard for me to go away and leave them behind. We stay because we have a teenage daughter who needs a lot of care. My son is already 19, much more independent, but even so, we still worry about his well-being and safety. So that would heavily influence any decision to leave."*
>
> (Man, 45, Cauca)

For Care-Entrenched Stayers, caregiving responsibilities and family attachment de-

Narrative Profile: Ximena

Ximena is a 30-year-old woman from Cauca, Colombia, who dreams of staying where she was born and raised. "*Why would I go to a strange place?*" she says. "*Here I grew up, people know me.*" Despite living in a highly vulnerable situation—with unstable daily income, chronic illness, and multiple family caregiving responsibilities—she sees her future in Colombia. "*If something ever forced me to leave, like being displaced, I would... but for now, I stay.*"

Ximena lives with and cares for her children and siblings, several of whom have serious health conditions. Her aspirations are modest but grounded: saving for a small piece of land, maybe opening a stationery stand or a tiny shop near home. She acknowledges the uncertainty of daily life—especially on rainy days when she can't sell—but remains anchored in faith and resilience: "*Even if it's just enough for rent and rice with egg, I thank God for each day I wake up.*"

fine the limits of action. Their lower levels of anxiety and conflict rates, compared to Segment 2, does not necessarily indicate the absence of suffering, but could point to the normalization of endurance within caregiving roles. Regardless, interviews revealed that many are indeed satisfied with their caregiving responsibilities and find meaning in staying close to t heir loved ones.

4.2.1.2. Subtype B. Settled Returnees and Former Migrants

Settled Returnees and Former Migrants have previous migration experience. They are not immobile because they lack capabilities, but because they no longer believe that migration fits their life course. Edgar, 47, who holds legal residency in Costa Rica, now lives in Cali with his wife and daughter. "*Migration is for when you are young. At this age, not anymore,*" he said. For respondents in this subgroup, migration is no longer aligned with their current priorities, which changed through experience, responsibility, and a sense of stability.

This subgroup is predominantly urban and concentrated in Cali. Returnees often re-anchor themselves through informal income, renewed social ties, and a new definition of stability. Statistically, they reflect the broader profile of Segment 1: older age (51.7 years), low education levels (8.7 years), low formal employment, and significant presence of elderly household members (44.3%). Unlike Care-Entrenched Stayers, however, Settled Returnees often retain capabilities to migrate—documents, legal status, or cross-border knowledge—that they now choose not to activate. As Edgar says: "*I was in Central America: Costa Rica, Mexico...I have contacts everywhere—my not wanting to leave is a different story.*" Caregiving appears in some narratives, but it is less intensive and less gendered. Most respondents are men who frame staying around relational continuity and autonomy, not sacrifice. The logic of staying among Settled Returnees is pragmatic and emotionally grounded.

Settled Returnees and Former Migrants have previous migration experience. They are not immobile because they lack capabilities, but because they no longer believe that migration fits their life course.

Exposure to external shocks is lower than in Segment 2 (27.6% experienced violence vs. 54.1% in Segment 2). Only 28% of Segment 1 households report exposure to violence, and rates of land conflict and climate-related stress are relatively low. Infrastructure issues persist but are seen as manageable nuisances rather than existential threats. Edgar notes house collapses during flood season and high utility costs, but frames it as a tolerable cost of staying. Psychologically, Settled Returnees appear stable. Rates of generalized anxiety disorder are low (21.6%), and household conflict is uncommon. Financial satisfaction is higher compared to Segment 2 (2.98 Segment 1 vs. 2.69 Segment 2). These are not households trapped by circumstances—they are anchored by reflective decisions to prioritize relational presence over economic pursuit. Migration is still seen as viable—but no longer necessary or desirable.

Narrative Profile: Edgar

Edgar is a 47-year-old man living in Cali who has chosen to stay in Colombia, even while recognizing that the country's economic reality is far from ideal. "*I'm staying for my family,*" he says, "*but not for the economy.*" His attachment to his mother, wife, daughter, and sisters weighs more than any opportunity abroad. Although he has contacts in other countries and past migration experience in Central America and Mexico, Edgar believes migration is a decision best made when young and without dependents.

He acknowledges the struggles—rising costs, limited educational opportunities for his daughter, and high fuel prices—but values the stability he has found. "*Here, we don't go without food,*" he says. "*And even though we don't contribute to the health system, we've received good care.*" Edgar has built a life rooted in relationships, and even though he holds Costa Rican nationality through his wife and daughter, he sees his future in Colombia, close to those he loves.

4.2.1.3. Subtype C. Satisfied Strategists: Staying with a Plan, Not by Default

Satisfied Strategists are household heads who have not migrated, but who have found stability through planning, partnership, and local investment. Their staying reflects a deliberate anchoring tied to raising children, investing in small businesses, and sustaining household life. For many, this choice is also deeply identity driven –rooted in a strong attachment to Colombia's culture, community ties, and everyday beauty. Rather than chasing uncertain opportunities abroad, they see richness and opportunity in what Colombia already offers. The decision to stay is not simply about avoiding hardship abroad, but about affirming belonging and pride in one's place and people. Lucila, 60, who lives in Cali, explains her preference to stay in Cali:

"I prefer to stay here in Cali because this is where my strengths are. I've never felt the urge to leave. People go abroad and struggle at first. It's better to save and avoid the need to migrate, especially when we already have so many riches here in Colombia."

(Woman, 60, Cali)

Satisfied Strategists appear both in Cali and Cauca and reflect a form of practical optimism. Statistically, they align with Segment`s 1's overall profile: older average age (51.7 years), low formal employment, and modest education levels (8.7 years). Yet within Segment 1, they stand out for their relative material footing. Financial satisfaction is higher (2.98 on a scale from 1 to 5), and household asset ownership—measured through durable goods indices is stronger compared to other subtypes. These house-

holds are not wealthy, but they are anchored. Migration is not foreclosed by fear or blocked by caregiving obligations. It is simply unnecessary to sustain their current trajectory.

These respondents reflect more balanced gender roles than other groups. Families are often structured around partnership and shared responsibilities. Unlike Settled Returnees, they are not recalibrating from past migration experiences. Their logic is rooted in the continuity of local life: children's schooling, micro-businesses, household cooperation, and near-term planning. They represent a forward-facing stability grounded in pragmatic sufficiency.

What is also striking is what they do not emphasize. Few mention violence, displacement, or environmental threat. Segment 1's overall lower exposure to shocks (28%) is confirmed in these narratives. When hardship appears, it is expressed in terms of manageable costs, not existential crises. As Lucila says: "What I do know is that our utility bills have gone up, but the impact hasn't been too bad. Overall, it's been okay. The fires, though—those were really terrible. It was shocking to see the hills burning. And there's nothing you can do."

(Woman, 60, Cali)

For Satisfied Strategists, staying is often the better option not because of a lack of ambition, but because it protects what they have already built, however humble. Many have already weighed the costs and benefits of migration and concluded that the financial, emotional, and social investment required to leave is better spent strengthening their lives and communities at home. Staying is an ongoing project of localized stability.

Narrative Profile: Lucila

Lucila, originally from Pasto but living in Cali, has chosen to stay in Cali—not out of necessity, but as a deliberate decision rooted in purpose. Together with her husband, she runs a small shoe business and sewing workshop, and dreams of growing it to eventually employ others. "*What I would do somewhere else, I can do here with my goals and plans,*" she says.

Though she has a friend in Chile willing to host her, Lucila has seen the risks of migration firsthand and prefers to invest her time and savings in her own community. As a member of a *sewing* group in Vista Hermosa and a proud admirer of Colombia's cultural richness, she finds joy in local traditions, nature, and solidarity. For Lucila, staying is a choice to protect what she has built and to keep growing it, right at home.

4.2.2. Segment 2: Aspirational, Blocked, or Displaced

If Segment 1 is defined by stability—whether rooted in care, return, or strategic settlement—Segment 2 is defined by friction. These respondents express high or unresolved migration aspirations, but face barriers that delay, distort, or erode their plans. What unites them is not the desire to remain—but the inability to move. Over 80% of respondents in this group have seriously considered leaving, with more than 60% of them currently thinking about it. Nearly all say they would migrate if they had the legal pathways or resources. Yet none have moved. Their immobility is shaped by constraint—financial, legal, relational, and emotional constraints shape their immobility.

Segment 2 respondents are younger (39.9 years), more educated (10.9 years), and have less relative exposure to migration networks (1.7 on a scale from 1 to 2) than their Segment 1 counterparts, although the index remains high.

Yet their capability to act is fragmented. These same respondents are also more exposed to violence (54%), land conflict (82.9%), environmental risk (48.2%), and psychological distress (25.9%), with 30.6% qualifying for generalized anxiety disorder. They report lower financial satisfaction (2.69 on a scale from 1 to 5), longer work hours (36.48), and lower trust in national institutions (2.23 on a scale from 1 to 4)—though some express confidence in local networks or NGOs (2.47 on a scale from 1 to 4). In many cases, trauma from past displacement lingers just beneath the surface. What emerges is a fragile configuration: people are most motivated to move just when it is most difficult to do so.

This is not a population without capability—it is one where capability is partial, provisional, and easily disrupted. Some have documents, but no money. Others have family support, but no time. Still others face blocked agency from within the household—through caregiving, spousal disagreement, or fear of separation. Migration remains aspirational—but often just out of reach. Life stage matters: many respondents are finishing school, raising young children, or managing informal work. Gender is just has important: women often carry heavier caregiving burdens and face blocked aspirations; men more frequently cite frustration with institutions, income, or legal obstacles. Geography matters, too. In Cali, narratives often revolve around strategic planning, paperwork, and bureaucratic delays. In Cauca, people more often describe care burdens, insecurity, or infrastructure collapse. These geographic lenses don't determine aspiration—but they do shape how gaps in capability unfold.

The result is not one form of staying, but three. Strategic Aspirants stay with purpose—waiting for the right time to act. Constrained Aspirants stay reluctantly—held back by family dynamics or caregiving burdens. And Trauma-Driven Stayees stay in distress—unable to act on urgent needs because capability has collapsed.

We identified three subtypes that reflect this dissonance between intention and possibility.

4.2.2.1. Subtype A. Strategic Aspirants: Staying with a Plan, Not with Resignation

These respondents have a clear migration goal and are actively planning around it. They follow legal pathways, track policy changes, and gather information. Migration is seen as feasible, but not immediate. Their tone is measured: they are willing to wait, to prepare, and to move when conditions align. In many cases, their households are supportive. They often mention friends or relatives who have migrated and describe migration as a delayed project—not a lost one. As Rocío, 48, from Cauca explains,

> *"I would like to leave mostly because of the economic situation. Not because I don't like my town or anything like that, but mainly because of the employment situation."*
>
> (Woman, 48, Cauca)

Statistically, these respondents are younger (39.87 years), with higher educational attainment (10.92 years), and more likely to be students or formally employed (24.1%). Most know someone who has migrated (1.7 on a scale from 1 to 2). Aspirations are real—but their capacity to act is shaped by household roles, income, and legal requirements to migrate legally. Gender shapes how those conditions unfold. Women like Sandra or Marcela, 39, in Cauca, describe how household responsibility slows mobility. This subtype appears in both Cali and Cauca. In Cali, respondents emphasize legal processes, digital paperwork, and program timelines. In Cauca, the focus is more often on caregiving, local insecurity, or slow household readiness. Across both, Strategic Aspirants are defined by optimism grounded in realism. They believe migration is possible—but not yet.

Psychologically, they appear less burdened than other Segment 2 groups. They report stress and institutional distrust, but not trauma. Few cite violence or environmental shocks as primary motivators. Their lives are not untouched by hardship—but aspiration here is not born of crisis.

4.2.2.2.Subtype B. Constrained Aspirants due to Care

Constrained Aspirants want to migrate. They say so clearly. But they remain in place because someone else depends on them—or because someone else decides for them. Their immobility is not due to lack of imagination or information. It is the result of caregiving obligations, household resistance, or emotional responsibility that overrides individual plans.

Statistically, Segment 2 households have more members under 18, and women report more caregiving hours than in Segment1. Many are in female-headed households, balancing school costs, health needs, and emotional labor with limited support. Financial satisfaction is low. Yet these women are often the ones holding the household together. Their aspiration is vivid—but conditional, often unspoken, and ultimately constrained. Unlike those in Segment 1, who rarely speak of migration at all, Constrained Aspirants hold on to the idea—but always at the edge of

possibility. Their stories reflect suspended ambition, shaped by care.

Marisa, 30, lives in Cali and supports two young children through informal work. She has relatives in Spain and has considered joining them.

> *"Maybe when I didn't have kids, we considered it—Spain or Chile, maybe. But then the kids came, and that changed things. At this point, my kids are settled here, and my oldest plays football. I think it would destabilize us."*
>
> (Woman, 30, Cali)

What distinguishes this subtype is the lack of autonomy. Many are informed, connected, and still aspirational. But they cannot act. Caregivers must weigh absence against responsibility. Partners must negotiate disagreements. And even when readiness exists, timing and dependency do not align. Unlike the Trauma-Driven Stayees, these respondents rarely cite violence or climate as the cause of their immobility. A few describe insecurity or fragile housing—especially in Cauca—but these are background pressures, not primary constraints. The main barrier is relational: What happens if I leave? Who will care? What will unravel?

Narrative Profile: Adrián

Adrián, a 41-year-old man living in Cali, Colombia, speaks openly about his desire to migrate. "I'd love to fly, like a bird," he says. If it were just him, he says, he wouldn't still be in the country. Yet for Adrián, migration is not just a question of money or paperwork. It's about care. "I'm the youngest," he explains. "And I'm the one who stayed with my mother." At 75, his mother is deeply rooted where they live, and she has no interest in leaving. While his plans for leaving remain stalled by caregiving responsibilities, he dreams of opening a beauty salon.

4.2.2.3. Subtype C. Trauma-Driven or Security-Driven Aspirants

This group views migration not as opportunity, but as escape. Their staying is not chosen. Many are survivors of violence, internal displacement, or threats of forced recruitment. Their desire to leave is urgent—but legal pathways, lack of documents and, specially, lack of economic resources keeps them in place, in a feeling that they describe as stagnation. Rodrigo, 45, living in Cauca reflects on this:

> *"The violence, the violence is what makes us leave. I am not really motivated to stay here, but rather one resigns oneself to being in that place because sometimes there's just no other option. So it's more like resignation."*
>
> (Man, 48, Cauca)

Their narratives are marked by past trauma, persistent threat, and emotional exhaustion. Segment2 as a whole shows higher exposure to violence (54%), land conflict, and low trust in state institutions. Anxiety is more prevalent here than in any other group (30.6%), and financial satisfaction is lowest. These respondents often live in peri-urban or remote rural zones. Many are without partners, formal displacement status, or social protection.

Unlike Strategic or Constrained Aspirants, Trauma-Driven Stayees do not frame migration in strategic terms. They are not checking visa timelines or planning in stages. Their aspiration is about escape, not sequencing. But escape requires resources, coordination, and hope—none of which they currently possess.

Instead, they describe a life lived under pressure: from gangs, armed groups, local threats, and institutional neglect. Infrastructure is fragile. Trust is minimal. Trauma is present. They stay not as a strategy, not with intention, and not because they must care for someone else—but because there is nowhere else to go. Some do not name climate change directly, yet live in housing and service environments that are highly vulnerable to environmental shocks. As Adelaida, 48, from Cauca reflects on the tensions within her community because of environmental consequences:

> *"There are killings, violence. Thank God my house has a zinc roof. At first, the sheets would blow off, and I would cry as the water leaked into the house. But now we've tied the zinc sheets down with wire, so they stay in place. Yes, but it has been hard through all these storms."*
>
> (Woman, 48, Cauca)

The six subtypes in Colombia's typology show that immobility is not a static condition—it is an evolving outcome shaped by the tension between aspiration and capability, filtered through care, trauma, institutional breakdown, and household decision-making. Section 3 steps back to identify the cross-cutting patterns that structure these staying dynamics: gender, displacement experience, and trust. These are not background factors—they are the terrain on which aspiration and agency must be negotiated.

Narrative Profile: Adelaida

Adelaida, a 48-year-old mother from Cauca, dreams of migrating for one reason: her children's future. After seeing her son endangered by local violence, she took out a loan to send him to Argentina for treatment. That debt, along with her daughter's lack of legal travel permission, has kept her from leaving herself. "*I do not want to be here anymore, not even in my house. Leaving would be a blessing—for me and my children.*"

Adelaida works long hours in a sewing workshop, earning less than the minimum wage. Her income only covers basic needs and loan repayments. She describes life in her town as unsafe and stagnant: "*They're killing our youth instead of helping them.*" Her hope is to reach Spain—for education, employment, and a fresh start. But the costs, paperwork, and emotional weight make it hard to act. "*I don't see a future here,*" she says. "*But I still believe we can have one somewhere else.*"

4.3. The logics behind aspirations and capabilities in Colombia

Immobility in Colombia cannot be understood apart from the broader structural conditions that shape people's lives and constrain their choices. Across all six typologies of immobility identified in this study—from Strategic Aspirants to Care-Entrenched Stayers—respondents described their decisions to stay as shaped not only by individual preferences or emotional ties, but by deeper institutional, economic, and spatial structures. This section identifies four intersecting structural factors that heavily influence immobility in Colombia: insecurity and the enduring legacies of violence; institutional abandonment and the erosion of trust; and spatial marginalization and unequal access to opportunity; and climate change.

4.3.1. Enduring Insecurity and the Legacies of Violence

Violence remains a pervasive backdrop to immobility in Colombia. In regions like Cauca and urban centers such as Cali, respondents described the ongoing presence of armed groups, extortion networks, and drug-related conflict as part of everyday life. For many, this insecurity is not simply a deterrent to mobility but a reason for immobilization.

Several respondents from both urban and rural areas expressed fear of leaving their communities due to the risks of encountering violence en route or in destination areas. Others, particularly returnees and internally displaced persons, described past traumas that discouraged further movement. In some cases, individuals had returned from displacement or deportation only to find that the same threats still existed—or had intensified. This persistent threat environment contributes to what we classify as Trauma-Driven Stayees: individuals who remain in place not because they feel safe, but because they feel paralyzed by fear, surveillance, or uncertainty. Insecurity, therefore, produces not only flight but also containment.

4.3.2. Institutional Abandonment and Erosion of Trust

The absence or failure of state institutions emerged repeatedly in interviews, particularly in rural Cauca and marginalized urban neighborhoods of Cali. Many respondents reported limited access to public services, protection systems, legal aid, or responsive local governance. This institutional vacuum produces a sense of abandonment that shapes both perceptions of what is possible and trust in future interventions. For some respondents, especially Settled Returnees and Care-Entrenched Stayers, the state was absent at key moments—during displacement, during return, or in the aftermath of violence—and this absence contributed to decisions to stay put. In these contexts, staying becomes an act of preservation: remaining in a place where informal networks and community ties, rather than institutions, provide security and support. For Strategic Aspirants and Constrained Aspirants, lack of institutional support in navigating migration pathways—such as legal documentation, reintegration services, or relocation support—contributes to stalled or suspended mobility. Institutional breakdown is not merely a background condition but an active force that shapes the horizon of possibility.

4.3.3. Spatial Marginalization and Unequal Access to Opportunity

Geography continues to determine access to mobility in Colombia. Whether through rural isolation or urban marginality, the physical and infrastructural disconnection of many communities places concrete limits on the ability to migrate—or to build viable futures elsewhere. In Cauca, several respondents noted that rural poverty, lack of transportation, and limited access to secondary education or healthcare made it difficult to prepare for migration or even imagine life elsewhere. In Cali's peripheries, youth often described being spatially and socially excluded from the city's formal economy, reinforcing their status as Constrained Aspirants. While aspirations to migrate were often strong, the absence of local opportunity and systemic barriers to integration elsewhere resulted in a condition of enforced waiting. Spatial marginalization thus not only restricts upward mobility within the place of origin but also blocks access to safer or more prosperous destinations. In many cases, immobility becomes the default outcome of geographic and infrastructural exclusion.

4.3.4. Gendered household decision-making

Gendered household decision-making emerged as a powerful structural factor shaping immobility in Colombia. Women were often cast in the role of "those who stay," expected to remain behind to care for children, elders, or the household itself, while male relatives—particularly sons or partners—were encouraged or pressured to migrate in pursuit of income. In many cases, women did not make the final decision about whether they could migrate; rather, they adapted to household strategies that prioritized male mobility and female rootedness. Even when women expressed aspirations to leave, their decisions were filtered through caregiving obligations, patriarchal family norms, and concerns over the risks of migration for women, including sexual violence. Some women internalized these roles as protective or stabilizing, while others experienced them as limiting and unjust. This gendered logic of household planning was especially visible in rural areas and among low-income families in urban peripheries, where constrained resources meant only one household member could afford to migrate—almost always a man. As a result, immobility for many women is not a singular choice, but a negotiated outcome shaped by power hierarchies within the family unit.

4.3.5. Environmental Risk and Climate Constraints

Climate-related hazards—such as flooding, landslides, and water shortages—are emerging as additional barriers to mobility in Colombia. In both Cauca and Cali, respondents described how environmental disruptions eroded their economic stability, damaged homes, and interrupted services like education and health care. These shocks drained the limited resources households might have used to migrate and heightened their dependence on already fragile support systems. For many, climate vulnerability did not drive displacement but reinforced immobility by compounding insecurity and poverty. Without targeted adaptation efforts or basic infrastructure, climate impacts are increasingly anchoring people in place—not by choice, but by cumulative constraint.

4.4. Program and Policy Implications for Colombia

4.4.1. Program Recommendations

4.4.1.1. Respond to Care-Rooted Immobility through Gender-Responsive Local Services

One of the most recurrent themes emerging from the Colombia study is the gendered structure of immobility, particularly in the context of care. Women—especially mothers, daughters, and grandmothers—frequently remain in place to fulfill caregiving responsibilities that are both socially expected and structurally unsupported. These Care-Entrenched Stayers are not immobile by choice alone but by obligation to children, elders, and households in contexts where alternatives are limited. Development programs

Many young people interviewed in Cali and Cauca described strong aspirations to migrate but lacked the resources, education, or institutional support to do so.

should expand gender-responsive services in areas like rural Cauca and the urban peripheries of Cali. These could include mobile health and psychosocial services, community childcare spaces, and legal guidance for women navigating issues of land, housing, or inheritance. These interventions would not only reduce the burdens that reinforce immobility but affirm the care work performed by women as an essential form of community resilience and stability. Furthermore, skill-building programs may be introduced to enhance labor market access and promote women's economic autonomy.

4.4.1.2. Promote Economic Inclusion for Youth and Returnees

A second key area for programming is economic inclusion, especially for youth and returnees. Many young people interviewed in Cali and Cauca described strong aspirations to migrate but lacked the resources, education, or institutional support to do so. Others—particularly men who had been deported—struggled to reintegrate into the labor market and expressed a sense of shame, frustration, or disorientation. These Frustrated Aspirants and Strategic Returnees are not simply "stuck" but caught in cycles of exclusion that diminish their ability to plan, act, or recover. Non-governmental development organizations can offer targeted vocational training, digital skills development, entrepreneurship incubators, and financial literacy support, especially to leverage their work with youth leadership, inclusive economies, and rural entrepreneurship. These initiatives could be paired with psychosocial counseling to facilitate the life-plan restructuring. Such programs could help shift immobility from a state of blocked aspiration to one of meaningful investment in place.

4.4.1.3. Invest in Community-Level Stability and Future-Building in High Emigration Areas

In areas of high out-migration, the study also identifies individuals who stay by choice—rooted in cultural identity, intergenerational land ties, or community commitment. These Settled Strategists and Cultural Anchors do not see immobility as failure, but as part of a conscious investment in building a future locally. In places like rural Cauca, this kind of staying is often tied to traditions, land continuity, and territorial resistance. Programs that reinforce this agency—through support for education, cultural initiatives, environmental stewardship, and youth-driven community projects—could improve existing work in strengthening rural communities. In this context, fostering youth connections to their land may help reverse rural abandonment. Intergenerational knowledge transfer

The study also highlights the experience of people who remain in place due to legal barriers or administrative precarity.

By making the act of staying more visible, these efforts would foster belonging and counter the shame that often accompanies immobility.

and the development of narratives that enhance the value of rural living would represent significant programming elements. Supporting place-based development is particularly critical to making staying a legitimate and respected life path, rather than a lesser alternative to migration.

4.4.1.4. Support Legal Navigation and Regularization for Immobile Migrants

The study also highlights the experience of people who remain in place due to legal barriers or administrative precarity. Migrants and displaced persons from Venezuela, Colombia's conflict-affected areas, or those who have returned from abroad often lack formal documentation or clarity about their legal status. This instability contributes to involuntary immobility: individuals cannot move forward with migration plans nor access services locally. Non-governmental development organizations could expand legal orientation services, support documentation access, and offer community-based legal education—especially in urban centers like Cali where legal precarity intersects with housing and labor insecurity. Helping individuals navigate their rights and regularize their status can restore a sense of control and reduce exposure to exploitation.

4.4.1.5. Foster New Narratives Around Staying as Strength

Finally, across all groups in the study, immobility is often accompanied by social stigma. Those who remain—whether by constraint or conviction—frequently feel misunderstood or devalued, particularly in communities with strong cultures of migration. Young people, in particular, reported feeling "left behind" or invisible when others departed. Non-governmental development organizations could invest in narrative change and youth engagement to shift these perceptions. Campaigns led by youth and returnees, storytelling initiatives in schools or community media, and digital platforms that elevate stories of strength, care, and rootedness could help reframe immobility as an active and courageous choice. By making the act of staying more visible, these efforts would foster belonging and counter the shame that often accompanies immobility.

Immobility in Colombia is rarely recognized as a meaningful category in policy discourse. Yet as this study shows, it is a pervasive experience.

4.4.2. Policy Recommendations

4.4.2.1. Recognize Immobility as a Distinct Policy Category

Immobility in Colombia is rarely recognized as a meaningful category in policy discourse. Yet as this study shows, it is a pervasive experience shaped by structural conditions such as violence, caregiving, exclusion, and climate vulnerability. National and local authorities should begin to treat immobility not simply as the absence of migration, but as a distinct condition requiring protection and investment. This shift would involve integrating immobile populations into migration policy frameworks, displacement strategies, and development planning. More accurate identification of immobile groups—particularly in regions like Cauca or among returnee populations—would allow for more inclusive and effective interventions.

4.4.2.2. Strengthen Local Protection Systems in Large and Mid-Sized Cities

At the municipal level, protection systems in cities like Cali and Popayán are under increasing strain, particularly given the arrival of returnees, internal migrants, and displaced populations. Respondents in the study often described fragmented service systems, difficulty accessing support, and a lack of coordination among institutions. Strengthening these protection systems will require both investment and training. Municipal governments must be supported to develop integrated referral networks, increase frontline staff capacity, and recognize the specific vulnerabilities of those who stay in high-risk conditions—not only those on the move.

4.4.2.3. Design Inclusive Social Policies that Extend to Returnees and Irregular Migrants

Colombia's growing population of returnees also highlights the need for inclusive social policy. Many returnees—especially those deported from the United States—face stigma, trauma, and administrative exclusion, while irregular migrants or IDPs often struggle to access services due to lack of documentation. National social policies should be expanded to guarantee access to education, healthcare, and psychosocial support regardless of legal status. Mechanisms like municipal registration, temporary protection programs, or amnesty pathways could help ensure that people who remain—whether recently returned or long-settled—can live with dignity and access the services they need.

4.4.2.4. Develop Reintegration Policies for Colombian Returnees

Closely linked to this is the need for a robust national reintegration strategy. For returnees, immobility often reflects disconnection, exclusion, or a sense of failure. Many experience difficulties finding work, rebuilding social networks, or re-establishing family roles. Reintegration policies must address these emotional and structural realities. Vocational training, job placement support, mental health services, and transitional housing should all form part of a comprehensive, trauma-informed approach—tailored to the diverse profiles of returnees. These policies could also include a gender and care

perspective, recognizing the specific challenges faced by women returnees—many of whom take on caregiving responsibilities without institutional support and are unfairly labeled as 'failed mothers' simply for having migrated alone.

4.4.2.5. Integrate Immobility into National Security and Climate Adaptation Plans

Finally, climate change and environmental degradation are increasingly shaping the contexts in which people remain. In both Cauca and Cali, climate shocks such as flooding, landslides, and water shortages undermined household stability, drained savings, and disrupted education or income. For many, these events reinforced immobility, making migration less attainable and place-based survival more precarious. National security and climate adaptation plans must take immobile populations into account—through vulnerability mapping, infrastructure investment, and targeted support in environmentally high-risk areas.

Graph 3. Segmentation Visualization in Colombia

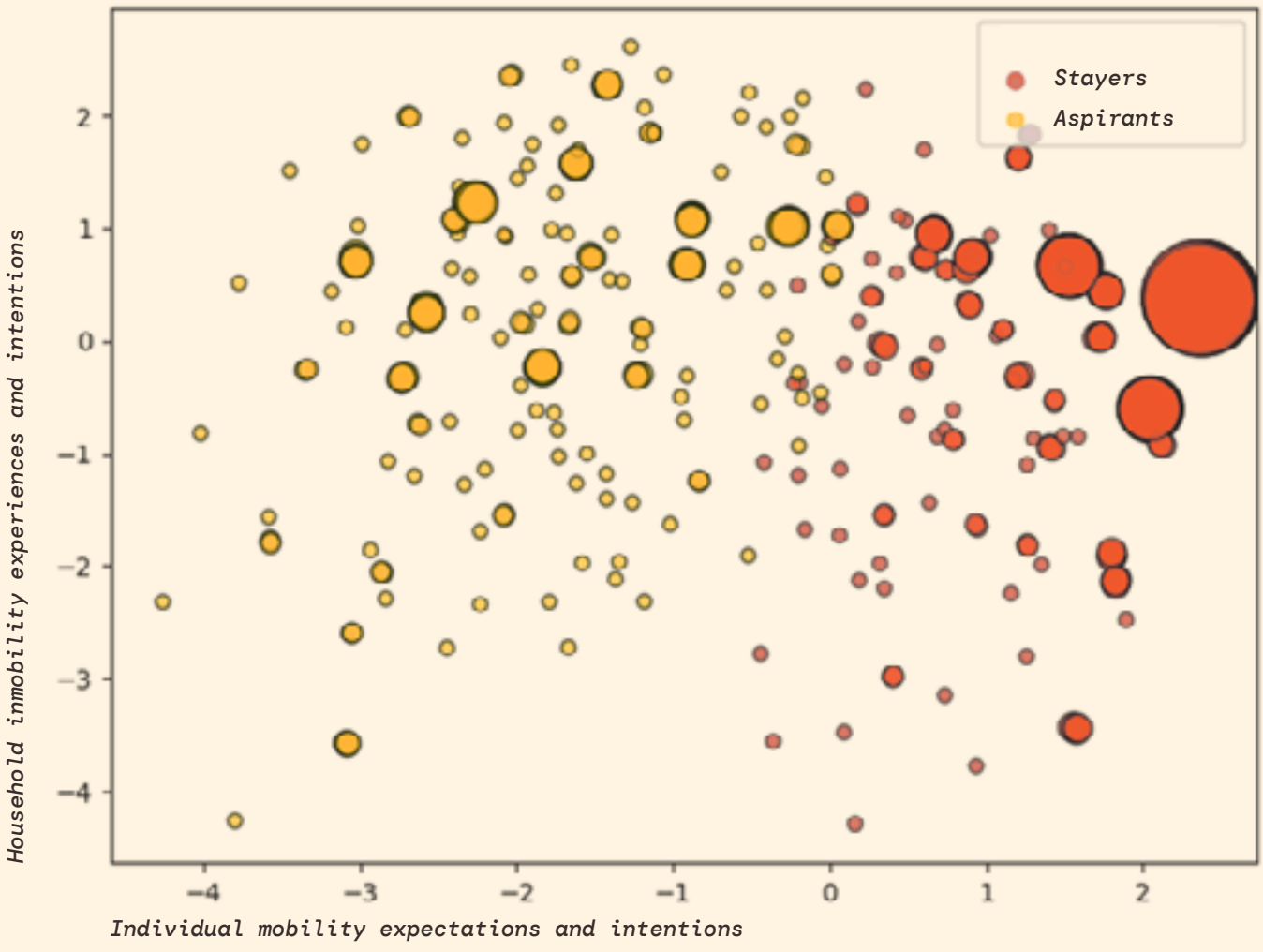

Table 7. Aspirations in Colombia

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Significance Comparison	Overall
Segment Size	55%	45%		
Individual (% Stay)				
Did not prepare to leave the country in last 5 years	Very High (82%)	Low (39%)	a	62%
Did not consider leaving country last 12 months	Very High (98%)	Low (20%)	a	62%
Did not consider leaving community last 12 months	Very High (96%)	High (70%)	a	84%
Would like to stay	Very High (90%)	Very Low (13%)	a	55%
Even if given documents, would stay in country	High (67%)	Very Low (1%)	a	37%
Think will still be here in 5 years	Very High (87%)	Medium (45%)	a	68%
Household (% Stay)				
You or someone in household did not leave last 5 years	Very High (91%)	Very High (86%)		89%
Nobody close (family or friend) left last 5 years	Very High (86%)	Very High (82%)		84%
You or someone in household do not migrate cyclically	High (64%)	Medium (49%)	a	58%
Nobody in your household wants to leave	Very High (81%)	Medium (43%)	a	64%

Note: Significance comparison indicates a significant difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a: segment 1 and segment 2

Table 8. Characteristics and Capabilities in Colombia

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Significance Comparison
Demographics (Respondent)			
Sex: Female	61.8%	64.0%	a
Age (Mean)	51.66	39.87	a
Education (Years)	8.71	10.92	a
Civil Status: With Partner	53.8%	43.7%	a
Region: Cali (vs. Cauca)	50.4%	51.1%	
Household Structure and Livelihood			
Household Assets (Index 0 to 1)	0.65	0.64	a
Household Members (Mean)	3.31	3.43	a
Property (Index 0 to 1)	0.37	0.32	
Main income source: Self-employed	62.6%	70.3%	
Main income source: Formal work	21.6%	24.1%	
Main income source: Informal work	12.0%	5.7%	
Main income source: Subsidies/transfers	3.8%	0.0%	
Remunerated Work Hours (Weekly, Mean)	30.42	36.48	a
Domestic Work Hours (Weekly, Mean)	25.94	31.09	a
Household tenure: Rented	29.1%	35.2%	
Household tenure: Owned by family or household member	70.3%	64.2%	
Gender norms (Index 0 to 1)	0.28	0.27	
Savings	16.7%	22.8%	

Loans	28.7%	24.0%	
Digital Wallet	30.0%	38.8%	
Household SES Ladder (0 to 10)	3.93	3.72	a
Financial Satisfaction (very bad 1 to 5 very good)	2.98	2.69	a
Optimism	4.89	5.01	
Health Status (Respondent)			
Mental Health (Anxiety Disorder)	11.5%	25.9%	
Optimism	4.89	5.01	
Expected Health and Education (mean)	2.11	2.08	
Physical Health (good and very good)	3.56	3.69	
Conflict and Stress (Household)			
Climate Stress	59.3%	48.2%	a
Violence Experienced	27.6%	54.1%	a
Land Conflict	72.2%	82.9%	a
Water Conflict	53.3%	62.1%	
Security Issues (Mean 1 to 4)	2.05	1.95	a
Trust (1 to 4): Government	2.39	2.23	a
Mobility Knowledge			
Mobility Knowledge (Index 1 to 2)	1.78	1.70	a

Note: Significance comparison indicates a significant difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a: segment 1 and segment 2

Table 9. Immobility Subtypes in Colombia

Subtype	Segment	Core Logic	Aspiration Level	Capabilities	Typical Profile
Care-Entrenched Stayers	Segment 1: Rooted, Carebound, or Reoriented	Staying shaped by caregiving duties and emotional bonds	Low or suppressed	Low to moderate	Middle-aged caregivers, mainly women in rural areas
Settled Returnees and Former Migrants	Segment 1: Rooted, Carebound, or Reoriented	Previous migration recalibrated; now choosing stability over mobility	Resolved or low	Moderate	Urban men with prior migration, valuing family ties
Satisfied Strategists	Segment 1: Rooted, Carebound, or Reoriented	Local investment, cultural pride, and family routines anchor staying	Low to moderate	Moderate	Older adults or household heads with micro-businesses
Strategic Aspirants	Segment 2: Aspirational, Blocked, or Displaced	Migration planned carefully but deferred due to external conditions	High, conditional	Moderate	Educated youth or adults preparing migration paths
Constrained Aspirants due to Care	Segment 2: Aspirational, Blocked, or Displaced	Migration desire blocked by caregiving or household obligations	High, constrained	Low to moderate	Women or family caregivers held back by duties
Trauma-Driven or Security-Driven Aspirants	Segment 2: Aspirational, Blocked, or Displaced	Desire to escape due to trauma and insecurity, but constrained by lack of resources	High, urgent	Low	Survivors of violence and displacement, living in insecurity

5. Ecuador: Immobility in an Andean Cross-Border Corridor

5.1. Introduction

5.1.1. Ecuador Immobility Context

Ecuador has long been shaped by migration. In the late 1990s, a period of economic collapse, dollarization, and political instability triggered one of the largest waves of emigration in the country's history—sending hundreds of thousands of Ecuadorians to Spain, the United States, and Italy.[1] This period set the stage for transnational family networks and migration aspirations that continue to influence Ecuadorian households today.

Two decades later, Ecuador now sits at the center of intersecting migration systems. It is simultaneously a destination, a country of transit, a point of return, and a renewed source of emigration. As of 2023, approximately 871,000 international migrants lived in Ecuador—mostly Venezuelans and Colombians—many of whom intended to continue to other countries but remained due to legal barriers, lack of resources, or shifting geopolitical dynamics.[2] Migrants from Haiti, Cuba, Afghanistan, and various African countries also transit through Ecuador, reinforcing its central role in the South American migration corridor.[3]

At the same time, Ecuadorians themselves are increasingly on the move again. Since 2019, irregular migration has surged—fueled by economic hardship, violence, organized crime, and post-pandemic precarity. Border regions and cities like Guayaquil, Manta, and Esmeraldas have become hotspots of drug-related violence, prompting both emigration and internal displacement. In January 2024, the government declared an internal armed conflict. At the same time, departures through the Darién Gap rose sharply: from fewer than 400 Ecuadorians in 2021 to more than 48,000 in the first nine months of 2023.[4] Returns are also increasing. Over 117,000 Ecuadorians were deported or returned from the U.S. and Mexico in 2023, and more than 94,000 in the first five months of 2024.[5]

1. Brad Jokisch and Jason Pribilsky, "The Panic to Leave: Economic Crisis and the 'New Emigration' from Ecuador," International Migration 40, no. 4 (2002): 75-102, https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2435.00206

2. Brad Jokisch, "Ecuador Juggles Rising Emigration and Challenges Accommodating Venezuelan Arrivals," Migration Policy Institute, 2023, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/ecuador-migration-trends-emigration-venezuelans

3. Soledad Álvarez-Velasco, "From Ecuador to Elsewhere," Migration and Society 3, no. 1 (2020): 1-16, https://doi.org/10.3167/arms.2020.111403

4. Jokisch, "Ecuador Juggles Rising Emigration."

5. Ecuavisa, "Entrevista con William Murillo - Presidente Ejecutivo de 1800Migrantes | Contacto Directo | Ecuavisa,"

These migration dynamics are not linear. Ecuador is best understood as a layered migration site—hosting displaced people, receiving deportees, and generating onward and return mobility within increasingly irregular circuits.[6] Herrera shows how migrants who originally planned to settle in Ecuador or other Southern destinations are often pushed into transit when conditions worsen or expectations collapse.[7]

Within this volatile context, the concept of immobility takes on new significance. Mata-Codesal, in her research in a highly mobile village in southern Ecuador, argues that immobility is not passive, but can be aspirational or strategic—especially when linked to care responsibilities, gender roles, or the perceived possibility of social mobility at home. She found that staying put was often valued, particularly by women, and associated with local success.[8] Cortés and Oso similarly highlight how return and immobility are shaped by gendered household strategies, where women are seen as "stayers" and men as mobile breadwinners.[9]

Together, these perspectives call for a more nuanced understanding of staying. This chapter responds to that call by examining why people stay in Ecuador, under what conditions, and with what meanings—amid constraint, care, aspiration, and resignation.

5.1.2. Site Selection: Ibarra and Otavalo

The fieldwork was conducted in the cities of Ibarra and Otavalo, both located in Imbabura—a province that encapsulates the complexity of Ecuador's contemporary mobility dynamics. Imbabura is home to a highly diverse population: long-term residents, returned Ecuadorian migrants, Venezuelan and Colombian refugees and asylum seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and people in transit to North America. According to UNHCR, many displaced people choose to settle in Imbabura due to the opportunities to work in agriculture, textiles, and tourism sectors.[10] The province also reflects both ends of the mobility spectrum—while it serves as a destination and refuge for many, it is simultaneously experiencing rising emigration. An IOM survey from 2023 found that 76% of Ecuadorians who intend to emigrate within the next 12 months are between 18 and 39 years old.[11]

YouTube video, June 6, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gC3F1A-HwwI

6. Álvarez-Velasco, «From Ecuador to Elsewhere.»

7. Gioconda Herrera, "From Immigration to Transit Migration: Race and Gender Entanglements in New Migration to Ecuador," in New Migration Patterns in the Americas, ed. by Andreas Feldmann, Xóchitl Bada, and Stephanie Schütze (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 199-218, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89384-6_11

8. Diana Mata-Codesal, "Ways of Staying Put in Ecuador: Social and Embodied Experiences of Mobility-Immobility Interactions," Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies (2015), https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2015.1053850

9. María de la Almudena Cortés and Laura Oso, "Birds of a Feather in Transnational Flight: Return, Gender and Mobility-Immobility Strategies between Ecuador and Spain," Revista Española de Sociología 26, no. 3 (2017): 359-72, https://docta.ucm.es/entities/publication/5b0b1dbe-68bd-48f1-9120-b0876d88eb57

10. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. UNHCR Ecuador: Ibarra Factsheet, January 2024. https://reliefweb.int/report/ecuador/unhcr-ecuador-ibarra-factsheet-january-2024

11. International Organization for Migration. Migration Trends in the Americas. Quarterly report, July-September 2023.https://lac.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl2601/files/documents/2024-07/en-tendencias-julio-setiembre-de-2024.pdf

Ibarra and Otavalo were selected not only for their demographic relevance but also for their programmatic alignment with Ayuda en Acción, which operates protection, economic integration, and social cohesion programs in both cities (and nearby Pimampiro). This institutional presence facilitated access and supported community engagement. Otavalo, with its long-standing Indigenous migration networks and strong cultural identity, offers insight into culturally rooted forms of immobility and circular migration. Ibarra, in contrast, presents a more urbanized context marked by recent migration inflows, transit dynamics, and rising aspirations to emigrate—especially among youth. These sites allowed the study to capture diverse subtypes of immobility, consistent with the project's broader comparative objectives and conceptual framework. In line the aspiration-capability model,[12] Imbabura provides a valuable lens for analyzing how people navigate decisions to stay amid care responsibilities, constrained capacities, perceived opportunities, and social ties.

5.1.3. Local Methodology

In Ecuador, the research focused on understanding how immobility in communities hosting displaced Colombians and Venezuelans alongside long-settled Ecuadorians unfolds in the context of rising insecurity, displacement, and legal and economic constraints. The team adapted the shared methodology to account for the intersecting roles of nationality, legal status, and local belonging in shaping people's ability to act on their aspirations.

To ground the study in local realities, four focus group discussions were held—two in Ibarra and two in Otavalo. These included Ecuadorian women, Ecuadorian men, and mixed-sex groups of displaced Venezuelans in Ibarra and Otavalo. The discussions helped refine how the team defined and measured staying and leaving, influencing both the framing and language of the survey instrument.

A total of 350 people were surveyed: 220 Ecuadorian nationals (including 49 who had relocated from elsewhere in the country) and 130 displaced foreigners –93 Venezuelans and 35 Colombians. Fieldwork was conducted in urban and peri-urban neighborhoods of Ibarra and Otavalo, with 284 interviews completed in Ibarra and 66 in Otavalo. An independent survey firm led implementation, supported by Ayuda en Acción staff, who facilitated recruitment and coordinated field logistics. Participants were recruited through a combination of beneficiary referrals and outreach via trusted local partners. A small incentive was provided to compensate respondents for their time.

The analysis used Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to identify distinct immobility profiles based on migration aspirations, household dynamics, and past mobility experiences. These statistical segments were further explored through a purposeful sample of 23 respondents for qualitative interviews. Interviewees were purposefully selected to reflect

12. Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel, "Revisiting Aspiration and Ability in International Migration," Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies 44, no. 6 (2017): 945-63, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1384146 and Hein de Haas, Migration Theory: Quo Vadis? IMI Working Paper no. 100 (2014), https://www.migrationinstitute.org/publications/wp-100-14

variation in gender, age, place of residence, and stated migration intentions—whether to stay or leave.

5.2. Types of immobility in Ecuador

The latent class analysis identified two dominant segments of staying: one group marked by individual aspiration and some household planning for migration, and another by low desire to move and no intention to prepare. These segments were built on both individual and household-level indicators: preference for future location, hypothetical choice if unconstrained, intentions of leaving, active preparation, past migration in the household, and household plans to remain.

Within the segments we identified six subtypes of immobility in Ecuador. Segment 1 includes those who stay with intention or adaptation—such as Strategic Migrant Planners preparing to migrate cautiously, Aspirational Planners with Constraints managing hope amid limitations, and Frustrated

Aspirants whose ambitions have been worn down over time. Segment 2 includes those who stay with commitment or belonging—Care-Rooted Stayers anchored by caregiving roles, Post-Mobility Stayers who have returned and chosen to remain, and Embedded Cultural Stayers who express no aspiration to migrate, grounded in emotional or cultural ties to place.

What emerges is not a simple contrast between movers and stayers, but a spectrum of immobility: from planned and strategic, to suspended and constrained, to anchored and chosen. These logics are visible across both Ecuadorians and international migrants and refugees—but they are shaped differently by nationality, status, and history of migration. Ecuadorians often frame staying in terms of place, responsibility, or cultural identity. International migrants, whose mobility histories include displacement, often frame staying as recovery, exhaustion, or protection.

5.2.1. Segment 1: Aspirational and Conditional Mobility

Segment 1 includes just over half the sample (56.6%) and is defined by strong individual aspiration to move paired with incomplete or fragile capacity to act. Only a small percentage of respondents (3%) would leave if given the documents, while 13% prefer to stay, and 18% have not seriously considered leaving. Many appear ready: they are younger (35.1 years), more educated (12.4 years of education), and more optimistic (5,08 on a 1 to 7 scale) than those in segment 2. They report better health (3,60 on a scale from 1 to 5), stronger digital access (18,6%), and slightly more stable employment (27%). Their labor market ties and trust in institutions suggest a baseline capability to pursue migration—at least in theory. Most reside in Ibarra (92%), where opportunity structures are different from Otavalo's more migrant-connected terrain. While the segment is mostly Ecuadorian (53%), it also includes displaced Colombians and Venezuelans—who share the same hopes, but face tighter constraints rooted in documentation and past trauma. However, their migration plans remain unrealized due to incomplete access to enabling structures. What distinguishes this segment is a gap between aspiration and execution. In Segment 1 the capability to aspire exists, but the opportunity to act is unstable.

Within this group lie three distinct logics of staying. Some individuals remain because they are Strategic Migrant Planners—actively preparing to migrate, but doing so cautiously or over time, often waiting for legal, financial, or institutional conditions to align. Others are Aspirational Planners with Constraints, who still wish to migrate but are held back by caregiving responsibilities, lack of documentation, limited savings, or household obligations. A third group, the Frustrated Aspirants, once envisioned migration but have since seen their aspirations erode—whether through repeated obstacles, failed attempts, or the quiet fatigue of deferred hope. These three subgroups reflect how the relationship between aspiration and capability produces immobility just as much as it produces movement. As the stories that follow illustrate, staying in Ecuador is not a passive state. It is a structured outcome, and—in three distinct ways—it is a form of suspended, constrained, or strategic choice.

Narrative Profile: Antonia

Antonia, a Venezuelan migrant in Otavalo, represents a Strategic Migrant Planner—someone who sees migration as a long-term, goal-oriented project. With a high school education and aspirations to study radiology, she envisions owning a small business and achieving independence through entrepreneurship.

She views her current stay in Ecuador as a temporary phase, not a final stop. Deeply appreciative of Otavalo's peace and the cultural strength of its Indigenous communities, she also recognizes her place as an outsider. Encouraged by her church community and family ties abroad, Antonia monitors potential migration pathways cautiously, weighing opportunities like resettlement through relatives or Canadian sponsorship against the uncertainties of recent U.S. policy changes or any job offer that would come with the access to regular migration pathways. She says: "*The uncle of my husband's boss at the laundromat wants to take his nephew. But he doesn't want to go. So if the uncle offers that opportunity to my husband instead, of course I'd think about it. Honestly, I wouldn't think twice, but always with a plan. We already suffered a lot from leaving our country.*"

5.2.1.1. Subtype A: Strategic Migrant Planners

These individuals conceptualize migration as a structured project. They possess clear goals, timelines, and strategies for leaving. Often younger and more educated, they rely on family networks abroad—an uncle in Spain, a cousin in Chile—while others navigate state programs or scholarship pathways with limited guidance. They stay in Ecuador, but see it as a temporary pause. Their immobility reflects strategic delay, not abandonment of their goals.

Among displaced Colombians and Venezuelans, strategic planning looks somewhat different. It is often less tied to education and more focused on legal pathways and resettlement options. Even with optimism, they operate under greater legal constraint. Still, the logic is similar: migration is viewed as possible, and staying is temporary.

5.2.1.2. Subtype B: Aspirational Planners with Constraint

Individuals in this subgroup also express a strong desire to leave, but are less optimistic than strategic planners. Migration is envisioned but not actively pursued. Constraints—financial, relational, legal—are immediately named. Unlike the strategic planners, they are not preparing to leave.

Compared to Strategic Migrant Planners, these individuals are more embedded in relational roles and more likely to frame migration as conflicting with current responsibilities. Many are women who stay to care for elders or children. Others are young men who voice ambition, but lack networks or savings.

Among displaced Colombians and Venezuelans, the constraint is often legal: lack of documentation, stalled registration in

Narrative Profile: Anderson

Anderson, 24, is a displaced Colombian living in Ibarra, clinging to hope for resettlement through UNHCR. "*The only way out I see is if UNHCR can take us,*" he says. But progress is slow. "*With everything happening in the U.S., even that route seems frozen now. It all just stops.*" For Anderson, regular migration is the only acceptable path—yet it remains just out of reach.

His aspirations to migrate—to study abroad, to earn, to help his family—remain vivid. But his reality is shaped by survival-level income, transnational family duties, and trauma from the violence his relatives still face in Colombia. "*I work just to say I'm alive, and that's because of my mother,*" he shares. Despite migrating, Anderson continues to contribute to his parents' healthcare costs via a family WhatsApp group that organizes monthly quotas. Still, he waits—hoping that the system will move, that UNHCR will call, and that one day he can leave to build his life in a safe country.

programs like Movilidad Segura,[1] or fear of irregular routes. Among Ecuadorians, especially young adults, it is more often economic dependency, thin support networks, or conflicting obligations within the household. This is a form of immobility best understood as conditional stasis.

5.2.1.3. Subtype C. Frustrated Aspirants

The respondents in this subgroup once hoped to migrate, but the path forward has narrowed or disappeared. Their tone is different—marked by weariness or resignation. Some still want to leave, but no longer believe they can. Others have stopped planning altogether. What unites them is narrative fatigue—they are still in place, but no longer in motion. Digital access is present, but unused. Frustration sometimes turns inward: The gap between what others achieve and what they cannot builds quiet resignation.

For displaced Colombians and Venezuelans, frustration is often layered atop displacement: the unfinished project of starting over. Some have already tried to leave again, or registered for programs that never called them back. Others speak of trying to save, trying to wait, and then giving up. Among Ecuadorians, especially men, the emotion leans toward stagnation and comparative shame. They know others who left. They say it with admiration, and sometimes with quiet bitterness.

What emerges is a subtype best defined not by inability, but by aspirational collapse. In De Haas's terms, these are individuals whose aspiration to migrate diminished because of

1. Movilidad Segura was a regional initiative implemented in Ecuador beginning on November 20, 2023, as part of a broader effort by the U.S. government and partners like UNHCR to facilitate safe, orderly, and regular migration pathways—primarily for Venezuelan refugees and migrants. The program provided access to legal documentation, resettlement opportunities, and humanitarian services, but was discontinued in May 2025, with no longer any new applications being accepted.

Narrative Profile: Zulay

Zulay, 30, fled armed violence in Colombia, hoping for safety in Ecuador. But in Ibarra, she faces continued insecurity, poverty, and discrimination. "*We survive on what we earn—just enough for rent and food. There's no savings, no school supplies, not even uniforms,*" she explains.

Zulay lives under threat—her husband was attacked by gang members, and she's endured an attempted sexual assault. She dreams of migrating to Canada or Spain, where she could work freely and ensure her children's safety and education. But the process has stalled because of economic constraints and lack of regular pathways. She explains: "*Money stopped us from migrating... We can't just leave—we have children, and we can't arrive in another country and end up on the street.*" And adds: "*We were hopeful about Movilidad Segura, but now everything is blocked. All we have is a passport.*"

the lack of capability. Their aspiration has faded—not because they no longer desire to leave, but because their capacity to imagine leaving has been worn down by repeated frustration or the silence of waiting too long.

5.2.2. Segment 2: Relational and Value-Driven Immobility

This segment reflects strong orientation toward staying (43.4% of the sample). Most respondents say their household plans to remain (77%), have not considered leaving (94%), and would choose to stay even if given legal freedom and resources (50%). Yet within this shared orientation lie very different logics: care, closure, culture, or recovery.

Respondents in this segment are older (48.1), less educated (10.2), and more likely to live in caregiving-heavy households (43%). They report higher unemployment (29.4%), lower digital access (8%). Institutional trust is generally higher (2.2 on a 1 to 4 scale). From a capability standpoint, these households may appear immobile because of constraint—but the interviews show a broader story: staying is framed as a life choice, offering protection or purpose.

Where segment 1 respondents often wait for permission or possibility, segment 2 respondents describe staying in relational, moral, or place-based terms. For some, it is about caring for others. For others, about having already moved and choosing now to stop. And for a few, migration simply doesn't exist in their personal or generational logic. For Ecuadorians, staying is often tied to land, identity, or faith. For displaced Colombians and Venezuelans, staying reflects a need for safety, a desire for stability, or exhaustion with movement itself.

These are not people whose aspiration has eroded—but people whose aspiration never aligned with migration in the first place. This is where negative liberty meets moral commitment, and where capability is shaped less by autonomy than by interdependence, obligation, and arrival.

Within this group, too, we observe three distinct logics of staying. Some individuals are Care-Rooted Stayers, whose decision to remain is guided by caregiving responsibilities—whether for children, elderly relatives, or others in need—and framed as a moral or relational obligation. Others are Post-Mobility Stayers, who have experienced migration in the past and now choose to remain, viewing their current immobility as a form of peace, recovery, or completion. A third group, the Embedded Cultural Stayers, have never seriously considered migration at all; their staying is rooted in deep place-based identity, tradition, and emotional belonging. These subgroups demonstrate that immobility is not synonymous with constraint. Rather, it emerges through care, resolution, and cultural anchoring—showing that staying can be an active and meaningful position, as structured and intentional as any decision to move.

5.2.2.1. Subtype A: Care-Rooted Stayers

These individuals stay because others depend on them. They frame migration not as an option foreclosed by poverty or pa-

Narrative Profile: Angelina

Angelina is a 36-year-old Ecuadorian woman living in Otavalo, Ecuador, who has made the conscious decision to stay in her homeland despite economic and bureaucratic challenges. "*I could spend all that money on paperwork to leave... or I could invest it here and build something with my own hands,*" she explains.

Life in Otavalo isn't always easy. Angelina depends on selling local products, and rain can bring everything to a halt—no customers, no sales, no income. But her deepest sense of belonging to the city-—a city she describes as peaceful and tranquil- and to her family motivates her to stay.

Her deepest motivation to stay is her children. "*Being together, watching them grow... if I left, they'd grow up alone. And that's something I could never accept.*" While many in her extended family are living in the U.S., she's watched their struggle from afar. "*I don't want that life—always hiding, fearing deportation. They live with fear, and the family gets separated. That's not living.*"

perwork, but as a decision that would go against care responsibilities. Their language is personal, ethical, and rooted in relational duty. For many, staying is a form of dignity—an act of loyalty to children, parents, or place. Migration is imagined not as opportunity but as abandonment.

Among displaced Colombians and Venezuelans, this caregiving logic is often protective—a choice to avoid further instability, especially for children. Among Ecuadorians, it is more likely to be framed as a moral obligation: rooted in responsibility, duty, or faith. Across both groups, care is not spoken of as constraint—but as justification. Our segment analysis reveals that these households are more likely to live with older adults (43%), more often report unemployment or informal/ambiguous labor status (59%), and are less digitally connected (8%). Education levels are typically lower (10.2 years).

Caregivers in this segment are not always women. Some are men—husbands caring for sick wives, sons staying close to home to help aging parents. This is capability constrained by moral commitment—a choice to stay that arises not from external restriction, but from relational priority.

5.2.2.2. Subtype B: Post-Mobility Stayers

This group includes people who have migrated—often multiple times—and now choose to remain. Their staying is completion, not concession. The language here is one of closure: peace, stability, family, and rebuilding. Especially among displaced Venezuelans and Colombians, some speak of staying as recovery—a moment to stop running, to rebuild after years of transit, waiting, or instability. This subgroup includes

Narrative Profile: Tomás

Tomás is a 31-year-old man from Bogotá, Colombia, who now calls Ibarra, Ecuador home: "*I came to this country with the purpose of starting a new life. I fell in love with Ecuador.*" After fleeing a deeply personal and violent conflict involving his brother and paramilitary groups in Colombia, Tomás is building a new life marked by peace, faith, and quiet persistence. "*Here, I don't live through the armed conflict I was living in back in Bogotá,*" he says. "*It's peace... the tranquility we have here.*"

His decision to stay is stable. Although he's concerned about the rise in insecurity in Ecuador he remains rooted. "*If something came up that fits with what I know and love—like managing a farm somewhere nearby—I'd consider moving within the country. But abroad? No.*" For Tomás, the idea of being far from his family, disconnected and alone, is too painful. "*At least here, if something happens, I can get on a bus or a truck and be with them in Bogotá.*" While he faces economic uncertainty, he's focused on eventually studying.

He's also found meaning in the solidarity between Colombia and Ecuador. "*There's support here—institutions that help us. If I left for Peru or Chile, I wouldn't have that.*"

both displaced Colombians and Venezuelans, and Ecuadorians with prior migration experience. Some left for work, others for safety. Some were deported, others returned voluntarily. What they now share is a logic of settlement—a quiet resolve to stop moving and start rebuilding.

In the third-step data, these households often appear under-resourced: low formal employment (16.84%), weak digital access (8,04%), modest education (10.16). But the interviews reveal another dimension: post-mobility as stabilization. This subtype represents voluntary immobility shaped by previous mobility.

Among displaced families, the decision to stop moving is framed as an act of protection. Having endured multiple moves, respondents frame staying as a way to protect children from instability, keep them in school, or preserve peace in the household. Among Ecuadorians, especially men who migrated for work, staying reflects a turning inward: toward fatherhood, community, or building something of their own.

5.2.2.3. Subtype C: Embedded Cultural Stayers

These respondents have never considered leaving. They speak of staying as a way of life—deeply tied to identity, land, and belonging. Their narratives are calm, affirming, and final. Unlike displaced households who may feel safe but unsettled, embedded cultural stayers never describe migration as a relevant horizon. It simply does not belong to their life course. As one Ecuadorian woman aged 40 put it: "*Why would I leave? I have my family here, my faith, my job. I'm at peace.*" (Woman, 40, Ibarra)

This subgroup almost exclusively includes Ecuadorians. For them, immobility is not the absence of options—it is based on the presence of home. Respondents are often older (average age of 48 years), live in or near their places of birth and, as seen in interviews, express strong cultural or spiritual ties to their environment. A third rely on agriculture, while others sell in local markets. Many speak of family land, neighbors, or church life as immovable foundations. They have

Narrative Profile: Joaquín

Joaquín, 44, is a father of four and lifelong resident of Ibarra. His heart is anchored to Ecuador. "*Ibarra is peaceful, calm. Here, I can work and build something for my children,*" he explains. A builder by trade, he's now studying to expand his skills and dreams of starting a construction business to employ others and stay close to his family.

Joaquín's motivations to remain are layered. He cherishes Ecuador's climate, affordable markets, and cultural rhythms—particularly local festivals that connect him to his land and people. "*It's beautiful here. The food is fresh, the traditions are alive,*" he says. He and his wife participate in traditional celebrations like San Juan and San Pedro. "*My wife loves the dances. We used to go sell at the fiestas with our truck,*" he recalls fondly.

Unlike the hardships he's seen migrants endure abroad, Joaquín sees potential in growing slowly but securely at home.

lower levels of education (10 years on average), minimal digital or formal economic engagement (8% use digital wallets, while 26% use savings and loan services), and low institutional trust. But these conditions are not voiced as constraints. They are part of a localized and familiar life.

This is voluntary immobility grounded in alignment—a rare case where aspiration and immobility are not in tension. These respondents may lack many formal capabilities, but their life purpose is not defined by movement. For them, the idea that mobility is always desirable doesn't hold. What matters is community, continuity, and proximity to the things that give meaning.

These six subtypes reflect more than variation—they reflect underlying dimensions in how immobility is experienced and explained. These groups, based on migration logic, aspiration level, and relational ties, offer a lens into who stays or goes—and why. It includes strategic planners and aspirants with constraints, typically younger migrants with goals but limited means, as well as frustrated aspirants who have faced repeated setbacks. On the immobility side, it identifies care-rooted women, former migrants seeking stability, and rural Ecuadorians grounded in place and tradition. Each profile reflects how decisions are shaped not just by personal ambition but also by caregiving, past experiences, and cultural belonging.

5.3. The logics behind aspirations and capabilities in Ecuador

The six subtypes identified in Section 2 reveal that immobility is not a single condition, but responds to a series of logics—aspirational, relational, resigned, and embedded. These logics differ in tone, structure, and motivation. But when we step back from individual segments, we see a set of deeper patterns that shape how staying is negotiated and experienced across contexts. What follows are four cross-cutting insights that emerge directly from the LCA models and narrative data. These are not new findings—they are the underlying structural dimensions that organize aspiration, capability, and constraint across Ecuador's immobility landscape.

5.3.1. Aspiration Across Life Stages and Perceived Opportunity of Staying

Age structured aspiration powerfully across the subtypes. In Segment 1, youth dominate: Strategic Migrant Planners and Aspirational Planners with Constraints are mainly younger respondents imagining migration as investment, advancement, or escape — often because they see limited pathways to achieve their goals locally. In Segment 2, age plays out differently: Post-Mobility Stayers and Embedded Cultural Stayers are often older, narrating staying as resolution or rightful place.

Aspirations and capabilities are shaped by these life trajectories. For youth, migration appears as the rational next step in a cost–benefit analysis. Many compare the overwhelming cost of living abroad or the risks of irregular migration with the potential gains—either remittances, education, or long-term family security. However, this same logic also drives some to pause. For a growing number of respondents in Segment 1, the cost of migrating—financial, emotional, legal—is weighed against starting a business or investing locally, even if resources are tight. In Segment 2, many in the group have already lived the arc of migration or have reached life milestones that make movement less attractive. For them, staying reflects fulfillment of prior aspirations—raising a family, acquiring a home, or establishing local stability. Having worked toward and attained what they once envisioned, they now seek continuity.

5.3.2. Gender, Care Work, and Households as Sites of Decision

Aspirations and capabilities are deeply shaped by gender roles, caregiving responsibilities, and family dynamics. Across both segments, the household emerges as a central arena where mobility decisions are negotiated—not only through material constraints but through emotional and relational commitments.

Women appear prominently in care-driven immobility, especially in Segment 2. Their narratives often place caregiving at the heart of staying decisions—caring for children, elderly parents, or disabled relatives.

For many, migration is not just logistically difficult, but morally or emotionally untenable.

For many, migration is not just logistically difficult, but morally or emotionally untenable. By contrast, men in Segment 2 more often frame their immobility as resolution or completion. Among Post-Mobility Stayers, male respondents describe staying as the end of a journey: a place of rebuilding, rest, or return. They have often migrated before and now seek stability for themselves and their families.

Among Care-Rooted Stayers, this logic is especially clear: staying is not only a constraint but a choice to protect and preserve family unity—sometimes shaped by gender expectations. These women express a firm relational ethic—"being there" is the value, and movement would mean abandonment. Thus, mobility and immobility are not solely individual choices—they are shaped by the interdependencies within the home. Understanding migration aspiration requires us to examine not just what people want, but who they are responsible for.

5.3.3. Trust, Violence, and Institutional Breakdown

Although Ibarra and Otavalo remain comparatively peaceful when viewed against other urban areas like Guayaquil, Esmeraldas, or Quito, violence and institutional

distrust are increasingly pivotal in shaping both aspiration and immobility in Ecuador. While often considered a background factor, security has emerged as a central axis of migration decision-making—especially amid rising national instability.

Across both segments, fear and distrust of institutions are shaping how people shape their aspirations and capabilities. For many displaced Colombians and Venezuelans, particularly those in irregular situations, trust in legal systems or migration pathways is almost entirely eroded. Programs like *Movilidad Segura* inspire hope—but often lead to waiting, silence, or sudden policy reversals. Ecuadorians, on the other hand, express a different form of institutional despair: deep skepticism toward local authorities, law enforcement, and political leaders. "*Here it feels like criminals have more rights than honest people,*" one man in Ibarra noted, echoing a widespread perception of lawlessness and impunity.

In this climate, the aspiration to migrate is paradoxically both heightened and obstructed. For many, worsening violence is a *reason* to consider leaving. Yet insecurity also becomes a *constraint* on the capacity to migrate—particularly for those who fear irregular routes or are responsible for vulnerable family members. One woman explained: "*If I leave, I'd be taking my daughter. What if we end up in the streets—or worse?*" Others shared fears of gender-based violence in their cities, preventing them to move freely. Some also pointed out how sexual violence and human trafficking is a risk along the route and in new destinations, reinforcing how threats are layered across spaces. In a context of growing violence and civic insecurity, staying becomes both cautious and involuntary.

5.3.4. Climate Stress, Economic Fragility, and Stalled Mobility

While climate change does not emerge as a direct driver of immobility in Ecuador, it significantly influences economic fragility, which in turn affects people's capacity to move. Across Otavalo and Ibarra, residents described how power outages caused by drought[1] disrupted daily life, health, and income generation. Small business owners and employees faced reduced hours, missed deadlines, or job losses due to unreliable electricity, especially in sectors like textile production, commerce, and food services. Heavy rains, flooding, and poor housing infrastructure further aggravated living conditions, particularly in unfinished or informal housing. These environmental stressors limit people's ability to save or plan, thereby reinforcing involuntary immobility. A 36-year-old Venezuelan woman in Otavalo explained: "*What they were saying about the power outages caused by the drought really affected us—in our jobs, in everything, because sales collapsed. They suspended us from work two days a week because the business couldn't sustain us. Yes, there really was an impact from that climate change.*" (Woman, 36, Otavalo)

1. In 2024, the impact of the structural energy deficit problem - compounded by the inability to purchase power from Colombia (also affected by drought) - led to the government's sudden decision to schedule power outages in April and later between September and December, with outages lasting up to 14 hours per day during October and November .

5.4. Program and Policy Implications for Ecuador

5.4.1. Program recommendations

5.4.1.1. Respond to Care-Rooted Immobility through Gender-Responsive Local Services

One of the most consistent findings in the Ecuador chapter is the critical role of caregiving in shaping immobility, particularly among women. Many respondents—especially older women and single mothers—remain in place not because they lack aspirations, but because they are anchored by caregiving responsibilities, emotional bonds, and community obligations. These Care-Rooted Stayers often express a deep sense of duty and moral obligation toward family members, especially dependents. To advance gender equality and community care, development programming should expand community-based services in areas like Ibarra and Otavalo. This could include child and elder care, care blocks2, mobile health brigades, psychosocial support, and legal guidance for women facing gender-based violence or household insecurity. Beyond alleviating the burden of care, these services should recognize staying as a valuable contribution to collective well-being—framing care not as a limitation, but as a foundation for dignified immobility.

2. Care Blocks ('Manzanas de Cuidados') are a public policy that clusters care infrastructure and services in designated urban areas to provide simultaneous, proximate support for caregivers and their families.

5.4.1.2. Promote Economic Inclusion for Frustrated Aspirants and Aspirational Planners

The study also reveals how economic exclusion serves as a significant barrier to mobility, especially among younger respondents. In both Imbabura and Otavalo, many individuals fall into the categories of Frustrated Aspirants and Aspirational Planners with Constraints. These are people who aspire to migrate but are unable to realize their plans due to limited income, failed past migration attempts, or the inability to save money while working in precarious or informal jobs. In some cases, immobility is marked by a state of frustrated planning—one foot out the door, but with no way to cross the threshold.

Some organizations are already carrying out relevant initiatives with Ecuadorian, Colombian, and Venezuelan populations in the area of livelihoods, but there is still room to expand and deepen these efforts. However, actors in the social and humanitarian sectors could adapt and broaden their work in livelihoods, rural development, and value chain strengthening, extending it also to urban and peri-urban populations who remain in their places of origin. It is crucial that these efforts be more targeted according to the different categories of aspirants identified, and that greater engagement with local governments be promoted in order to incorporate these categories into socioeconomic development programs. This is especially relevant given that no single organization can reach the entire population in contexts like Imbabura. Programs could include specific initiatives in youth entrepreneurship,

professional and digital training, support for informal workers transitioning to cooperative models, and access to financial education and seed capital. These efforts would help transform immobility from a condition of stagnation into one of potential and resilience, while grounding development in the specific aspirations of those who stay.

5.4.1.3. Invest in Community-Level Stability and Future-Building in High Emigration Areas

In areas with high emigration rates, such as Ibarra's peripheries or rural Otavalo, the chapter reveals another kind of immobility: one rooted not in constraint but in investment and conviction. Among Strategic Migrant Planners and Embedded Cultural Stayers, the decision to stay is often about continuity—of land, community, education, or cultural identity. Many see the act of staying as a way to build a viable future in place, one that offers safety, pride, and stability. This suggests a powerful opportunity to support communities in shaping local futures that make migration feel less necessary. Developmental programs could focus on strengthening local governance, supporting education and environmental initiatives, and offering financial support and seed capital programs with special attention to young people. Efforts that affirm staying as a forward-looking and socially valued decision can reinforce a culture of permanence that supports both individual dignity and long-term resilience.

5.4.1.4. Support Legal Navigation and Regularization for Immobile Migrants

Another key programmatic need concerns migrants from Venezuela and Colombia—many of whom are immobilized in cities like Ibarra not by choice, but due to legal and administrative obstacles. These individuals often lack stable documentation or are caught in an exhausting cycle of renewing temporary permits, limiting their access to formal work, housing, and services. The result is a form of involuntary immobility that produces daily uncertainty. Developmental programming should focus on supporting legal navigation through mobile legal clinics, documentation support initiatives, and rights education workshops delivered in collaboration with local partners. Helping migrants overcome legal precarity would reduce exposure to exploitation, enable long-term planning, and support integration in host communities—shifting immobility from a condition of exclusion to one of greater security.

These individuals often lack stable documentation or are caught in an exhausting cycle of renewing temporary permits, limiting their access to formal work, housing, and services.

The migration regularization programs implemented by the Ecuadorian government to address Venezuelan migration have been exceptional in nature, featuring difficult-to-meet requirements and temporary (rather than permanent) statuses. The VERHU (Humanitarian Exception Visa) and VIRTE (Exceptional Temporary Residence Visa) granted a maximum two-year stay, after which beneficiaries would revert to irregular status. In this context, civil society organizations could leverage their influence to advocate for regularization pathways that facilitate long-term stability and prevent renewed irregularity and uncertainty. Such processes should also ensure affordable application fees for target populations. Civil society organizations can further utilize their reach to improve information access for migrants eligible for these programs. This approach would foster voluntary immobility and support the socioeconomic integration of human mobility populations.

5.4.1.5. Foster New Narratives Around Staying as Strength

Finally, across nearly all of the profiles identified in the chapter, immobility is often accompanied by social stigma. Many of those who stay feel misjudged by neighbors or relatives, especially when staying is perceived as failure or resignation. Others described a prevailing "culture of leaving" in their communities, which paints migration as the only path to success. Young people in particular described feeling left behind when peers or family members left for the United States or Europe. Non-governmental development organizations could deepen their work on social cohesion and community engagement by launching narrative-shifting campaigns that highlight the resilience, creativity, and dignity of those who stay. Youth-led storytelling projects, local radio segments, school-based dialogues, and digital media campaigns could elevate the voices of Post-Mobility Stayers and Culturally Embedded Stayers, challenging stigma and reframing staying as a form of strength and contribution.

5.4.2. Policy recommendations

5.4.2.1. Recognize Immobility as a Policy-Relevant Mobility Outcome

The Ecuador chapter makes clear that immobility is not a neutral or passive condition. For many, staying is the result of structural constraints—such as poverty, insecurity, caregiving, or legal exclusion—not personal choice alone. Yet immobile populations are rarely acknowledged in migration, humanitarian, or development policy. National and local actors should begin recognizing immobility as a distinct policy category, particularly in high-risk zones where people remain despite clear threats or limited access to services. This would involve integrating immobility into national mobility strategies, protection frameworks, and development plans. More accurate identification of immobile populations would allow for targeted interventions—reaching those who are most vulnerable, yet often invisible to the system.

5.4.2.2. Strengthen Local Protection Systems in Mid-Sized Cities like Ibarra

In mid-sized cities like Ibarra, protection needs are increasing, but local service capacity remains overstretched. Ibarra now hosts a diverse population of displaced people, returnees, and migrants in transit or settlement. Respondents in the study frequently described difficulty accessing services related to housing, documentation, and health, particularly for survivors of violence or those with irregular status. Strengthening local protection systems should be a national and municipal priority. This includes providing municipal governments with the resources and training to address the specific needs of immobile populations, strengthening referral systems, and coordinating better across institutions. Frontline workers must also be trained to recognize and respond to various forms of immobility—whether related to care work, migration status, or displacement.

5.4.2.3. Design Inclusive Social Policies that Extend to Returnees and Irregular Migrants

The chapter also underscores that returnees and irregular migrants—particularly those from Venezuela, Colombia, or the U.S.—are often excluded from basic social services. Many return to Ecuador with few networks, facing stigma or administrative barriers to health, education, or psychosocial support. Social policy must become more inclusive. National and municipal actors should develop systems to extend access to services regardless of migration status—such as registration schemes for returnees and municipal IDs for undocumented migrants. These mechanisms would allow individuals to enroll in school, seek medical care, or apply for public benefits, helping to ease the burdens that reinforce involuntary immobility.

5.4.2.4. Develop Reintegration Policies for Ecuadorian Returnees

Return migration is a growing trend in Ecuador, but national reintegration policy —such as the Emergency Assistance Program for returned Ecuadorians offered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs3— remains underdeveloped. As the chapter reveals, many Ecuadorians—especially men deported from the United States—experience reintegration as a form of immobilization, marked by shame, loss of status, and lack of opportunity. Women returnees often face a reimposition of caregiving responsibilities without support. To address this, Ecuador should develop a targeted reintegration strategy that includes access to vocational training, psychosocial services, employment pathways, and housing assistance. These policies must be gender-sensitive, trauma-informed, and tailored to the specific realities of those returning from different migration contexts. 5.4.2.5. Link Immobility to National Security and Climate Adaptation Plans

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3. Read more about the Emergency Assistance Plan for Returned Ecuadorians at: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility of Ecuador. Cancillería establece plan de asistencia emergente para ecuatorianos en Estados Unidos y de apoyo a compatriotas retornados. February 6, 2025. https://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/2025/02/06/cancilleria-establece-plan-de-asistencia-emergente-para-ecuatorianos-en-estados-unidos-y-de-apoyo-a-compatriotas-retornados/.

5.4.2.5. Link immobility to risk management and climate change adaptation plans

Finally, immobility in Ecuador must be addressed within national frameworks on security and climate adaptation. Many respondents reported remaining in flood-prone housing, or environmentally degraded areas because they had no realistic alternative. Yet national risk mitigation and climate resilience strategies often prioritize mobility—evacuation, resettlement, or temporary shelter—while overlooking those who stay behind. Planning frameworks should include immobile populations in vulnerability mapping and early warning systems. This means designing relocation or housing support for those unable to move and ensuring they are not excluded from emergency preparedness or recovery assistance.

Graph 4. Segmentation Visualization in Ecuador

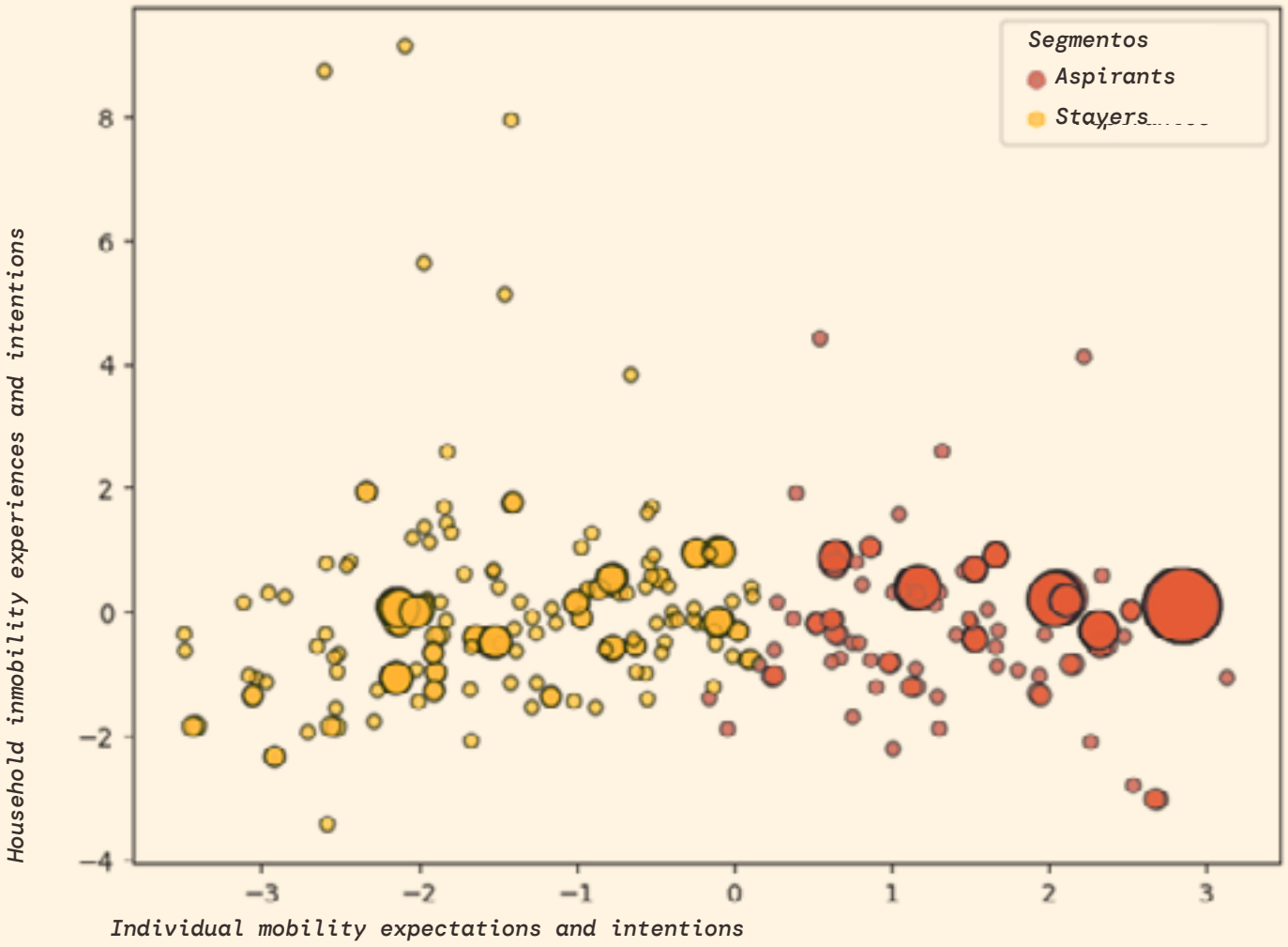

Table 10. Aspirations in Ecuador

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Significance Comparison	Overall
Segment Size	57%	43%		
Individual (% Stay)				
Did not prepare to leave the country in last 5 years	Medium (48%)	Very High (84%)	a	64%
Did not consider leaving country last 12 months	Very Low (18%)	Very High (94%)	a	51%
Did not consider leaving community last 12 months	High (65%)	Very High (93%)	a	77%
Would like to stay	Very Low (13%)	Very High (84%)	a	44%
Even if given documents, would stay in country	Very Low (3%)	Medium (50%)	a	24%
Think will still be here in 5 years	Low (32%)	Very High (81%)	a	53%
Household (% Stay)				
You or someone in household did not leave last 5 years	Very High (81%)	Very High (92%)	a	86%
Nobody close (family or friend) left last 5 years	High (80%)	Very High (89%)		84%
You or someone in household do not migrate cyclically	Medium (43%)	High (76%)	a	57%
Nobody in your household wants to leave	Medium (43%)	High (77%)	a	58%

Note: Significance comparison indicates a significant difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a: segment1 and segment 2

Table 11. Characteristics and Capabilities in Ecuador

	Segment1: Stayers	Segment2: Aspirants	Significance Comparison
Demographics (Respondent)			a
Sex: Female	58.80%	68.61%	a
Age (mean)	35.14	48.13	a
Education (years)	12.4	10.16	a
Civil Status: *With Partner*	30.78%	41.18%	
Region: Ibarra (vs. Otavalo)	91,72%	71,6%	a
Household Structure and Livelihood			
Household Assets (Index 0 to 1)	0.65	0.63	a
Household Members (mean)	4.21	4.21	a
Property (index 0 to 1)	0.35	0.38	
Main income source: Self-employed	74.69%	68.12%	
Main income source: Formal work	16.67%	16.84%	
Main income source: Informal work	6,56%	5,80%	
Main income source: Subsidies/transfers	2.08%	9.23%	
Remunerated Work Hours (weekly, mean)	31.55	24.97	a
Domestic Work Hours (weekly, mean)	23.46	28.36	
Household tenure: Rented	64.29%	44.53%	
Household tenure: Owned by family or household member	34.02%	53.29%	
Gender norms (index 0 to 1)	0.29	0.27	a
Savings	32,76%	23,65%	

Loans	35,57%	27,67%	
Digital Wallet	18,55%	8,04%	a
Household SES (0 to 10)	4,54	4,31	a
Financial Satisfaction (1 to 5)	2,57	2,63	a
Health Status (Respondent)			
Expected Health and Education (mean)	1,97	1,90	
Physical Health (good and very good)	3,60	3,20	
Mental Health (Anxiety Disorder)	30,24%	23,56%	
Optimism	5,08	4,69	a
Conflict and Stress (Household)			
Climate Stress	64,75%	65,47%	
Violence Experienced	57,80%	45,10%	a
Land Conflict	74,46%	78,10%	a
Water Conflict	69,51%	60,61%	
Security Issues (mean 1 to 4)	2,04	2,00	
Trust (1 to 4): Government	1,90	2,22	a
Mobility Knowledge			
Mobility Knowledge (index 0 to 2)	1,64	1,73	a

Note: Significance comparison indicates a significant difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a: segment 1 and segment 2.

Table 12. Immobility Subtypes in Ecuador

Subtype	Segment	Core Logic	Aspiration Level	Capabilities	Typical Profile
Strategic Migrant Planners	Aspirational and Conditional Mobility	Planned mobility; waiting for opportunity	High	Moderate	Young Ecuadorians or International migrants with clear goals and moderate access to planning tools
Aspirational Planners with Constraints	Aspirational and Conditional Mobility	Desire to move blocked by caregiving, cost, or documents	High	Low	Young women or low-income migrants with ambition but no pathway
Frustrated Aspirants	Aspirational and Conditional Mobility	Unmet aspiration hardened into resignation	Once high, now eroded	Low- moderate	Youth without networks or older displaced migrants with past failures
Care-Rooted Stayers	Relational and Value-Driven Immobility	Staying framed as moral obligation to care	Low or redirected	Low	Women, especially mothers or caregivers, across nationalities
Post-Mobility Stayers	Relational and Value-Driven Immobility	Post-migration peace or rebuilding	Alta, limitada	Baja a moderada	Mujeres o personas cuidadoras familiares retenidas por sus obligaciones
	Inmovilidad relacional y determinada por los valores	Paz o reconstrucción tras la migración	Resolved or fulfilled	Low- moderate	Midlife or older adults with prior migration, now seeking stability
Embedded Cultural Stayers	Relational and Value-Driven Immobility	Place-based identity; migration never considered	Very low or absent	Very low	Rural or small-town Ecuadorians with strong territorial attachment

6.
Mexico: Immobility in a City of Transit

6.1. Introduction

6.1.1. Mexico Immobility Context

Mexico has long occupied a central role in regional migration dynamics. Historically a country of emigration, Mexico has seen millions of its citizens move to the United States in search of economic opportunity, safety, and family reunification. These movements have been driven by long-standing structural factors, including poverty, job scarcity, corruption, and insecurity, as well as more acute phenomena such as organized crime and drug-related violence. Over time, migration to the U.S. has become deeply embedded in family strategies and intergenerational mobility expectations. In recent years, however, Mexico's migration landscape has grown significantly more complex. The country is no longer just a point of origin, but also a country of transit, return, displacement, and destination.

Large numbers of migrants—particularly from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Venezuela, and Cuba—now pass through or settle in Mexico. According to the Migration Policy Institute, in 2022 alone, approximately 450,000 people crossed through Mexico irregularly, including 22% Venezuelans, 16% Hondurans, and 15% Guatemalans, along with significant populations from Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Colombia.[1] As reaching the United States becomes increasingly difficult, many migrants seek temporary or permanent settlement in Mexico, especially in the southeast of the country. One avenue for doing so is the asylum system: in 2023, more than 140,000 individuals from over 100 countries sought asylum in Mexico, representing a new record and a 17% increase from 2022.

Mexico is also experiencing return migration on a large scale. In 2023, the United States deported over 211,000 Mexican nationals, many of whom are reentering Mexican society with new needs and family configurations, including U.S.-born children.[2] Others are returning voluntarily, motivated by family reunification, changing economic opportunities, and access to social protections. These dynamics are reshaping notions of home and belonging for many transnational families.

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1. Francisco Alba, "Mexico at a Crossroads Once More: Emigration Levels Off as Transit Migration and Immigration Rise," Migration Policy Institute, 2024, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/mexico-crossroads-emigration-transit

2. Ibid.

Internally, Mexico has also seen a marked increase in forced displacement. From January to November 2023, at least 42 mass displacement events were recorded—each involving at least 20 people—displacing an estimated 10,850 people. These events, linked to escalating violence by criminal groups and land disputes, affected at least seven states.[3] Internal displacement is now a growing concern, even as the state struggles to track, protect, or support affected populations.

At the same time, immobility—whether chosen or imposed—is becoming a key feature of Mexico's migration reality. Building on qualitative research by Mata-Codesal[4] and Cohen[5] this chapter draws attention to how people in Mexico navigate the decision to stay. In her study of Zacualpan, Mata-Codesal examined a range of mobility patterns, including return migration, emigration to the U.S. and Europe, circular migration, and internal rural–urban shifts.[6] Her findings reveal that age, gender, and education play central roles in shaping immobility: older adults and less-educated individuals are more likely to stay, as are women, who are often expected to remain for caregiving and social cohesion roles. In some cases, migration itself is used as a strategy to enable others to stay, showing how mobility and immobility are closely intertwined.

In a related study, Mata-Codesal also explored the gendered construction of immobility, noting how in communities with deep migration histories, women's roles are often "invisibilized," casting them as naturally sedentary while portraying male migration as normative.[7] She advocates for a defeminization of immobility, to recognize the often-overlooked mobilities and choices of women. Cohen, in his study of rural Oaxaca, also identified different types of non-migrating households—marginal, average, and successful—each with distinct motivations and constraints related to staying put.[8] These typologies remain relevant for understanding contemporary immobility in rural and urban Mexico alike.

Together, these trends point to a dynamic and layered migration landscape in Mexico. Mobility is no longer the default trajectory. Instead, many people find themselves caught in a web of structural, emotional, legal, and relational conditions that produce immobility—whether temporary, cyclical, strategic, or resigned. Understanding these nuances is crucial not only for migration policy, but for social protection, urban planning, and humanitarian response frameworks across the country.

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3. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mexico February 2024 Fact Sheet (2024), https://www.acnur.org/mx/sites/es-mx/files/2024-02/ENG%20-%20UNHCR%20Mexico%20Operation%20Factsheet_Feb%20.pdf

4. Diana Mata-Codesal, "Is It Simpler to Leave or to Stay Put? Desired Immobility in a Mexican Village," Population, Space and Place 24 (2017): e2127, https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2127 and Diana Mata-Codesal, "Gendered (Im)mobility: Rooted Women and Waiting Penelopes," Crossings: Journal of Migration and Culture 8, no. 2 (November 2017): 151-62, https://doi.org/10.1386/cjmc.8.2.151_1

5. Jeffrey H. Cohen, "Migration and 'Stay at Homes' in Rural Oaxaca, Mexico: Local Expression of Global Outcomes," Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development 31, no. 2 (2002): 231-259

6. Mata-Codesal, "Is it simpler to leave?"

7. Mata-Codesal, "Gendered (Im)mobility: Rooted women and waiting Penelopes"

8. Cohen, "Migration and 'stay at homes' in rural Oaxaca, Mexico: Local expression of global outcomes"

6.1.2. Site selection: Mexico City

Mexico City was selected as a research site due to its critical role as a complex hub of both origin and destination in national and regional mobility dynamics. As the sixth-largest state of emigration in the country—primarily through regular channels—it is also home to growing numbers of returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and migrants in transit or settlement, especially from Central America and the Caribbean. Specific boroughs such as Iztapalapa, Gustavo A. Madero, and Álvaro Obregón have emerged as focal points for diverse mobility profiles, including populations affected by criminal violence, deportation, or economic marginalization.

For this study, Mexico City offers a valuable opportunity to explore multiple forms of immobility—from voluntary stay rooted in family, work, or identity, to involuntary staying linked to bureaucratic obstacles, legal uncertainty, or lack of resources. Ayuda en Acción's presence in the capital, through programs focused on employability and organizational strengthening, further supports its relevance as a site where immobility can be studied not only as a constraint, but as a negotiated and sometimes strategic position. Research conducted here is well-positioned to capture the intersection of urban precarity, gendered care roles, legal ambiguity, and post-migration readjustment, offering rich comparative insight into how immobility is experienced in large metropolitan contexts.

6.1.3. Local Methodology

In Mexico, the study was conducted in Mexico City and its metropolitan area, where layered vulnerabilities shape the logic of staying. The research focused on two groups: Mexican nationals navigating chronic insecurity and marginalization within the urban periphery, and displaced foreigners, primarily in transit, whose mobility had been interrupted by restrictive border regimes, legal precarity, and exposure to organized crime. The research team adapted the shared methodology to capture how aspirations and constraints interact in a setting where mobility is not only strategic but often suspended.

Two focus groups were held: one with Mexican residents and another with displaced foreigners in transit. These discussions shed light on how each group understands staying and informed the design and language of the survey instrument.

The survey reached 351 respondents: 175 Mexican nationals and 176 foreign-born individuals. Among the foreign respondents, the most represented places of origin were Venezuela (80), Cuba (38), and other South American countries excluding Venezuela (24), followed by Central American countries, mainly El Salvador and Nicaragua (16), Haiti (13), and extra-continental regions (5). Surveys were carried out across Mexico City (229 respondents) and its surrounding metropolitan area (122). An independent survey firm led the data collection and were responsible for recruitment and logistics through local partners, shelters, and community networks. A small incentive was offered as compensation for participation.

Latent Class Analysis was used to identify distinct immobility profiles, based on migration intentions, household dynamics, and past movement experiences. These profiles captured both aspirational immobility—where people stay by choice or with hope of local integration—and involuntary immobility, marked by blocked movement and constrained options.

To deepen the analysis, 22 in-depth interviews[9] were conducted with individuals from both groups, including 11 people cur-

9. The interviews were conducted following the Donald Trump administration's announcement of the shutdown of CBP One and the start of mass deportations from the United States. This led to many people waiting in Mexico in the shelters and spaces for the interview appointments experiencing severe anxiety, creating uncertainty about their migration plans.

rently in transit. Participants were purposefully selected to reflect variation in gender, age, nationality, and migration aspirations, whether to stay or to go. These life histories revealed how immobility is lived and negotiated in contexts of legal ambiguity, family separation, and systemic exclusion.

6.2. Types of immobility in Mexico

This chapter identifies six subtypes of immobility in Mexico, embedded in two overarching segments that reflect distinct logics of staying. Segment 1 includes individuals who remain with clarity, intent, or resolution—such as Strategic Returnees and Settled Providers, who have come back from the U.S. and rebuilt stable lives; Care-Entrenched and Anchored Women, who stay to uphold caregiving roles and household continuity; and Rooted by Aspiration, often foreign-born individuals whose immobility is guided by fulfilled aspirations or a sense of purpose. Segment 2, by contrast, includes those who remain amid tension or constraint—Blocked Youth and Caregivers, whose aspirations to migrate are obstructed by economic hardship, legal uncertainty, or family obligations; Ideological or Cultural Cosmopolitans, who remain reflexively engaged with migration as an idea or possibility but experience ongoing pause; and Exhausted and Acquiescent Stayers, who have internalized immobility after repeated setbacks, exclusion, or fatigue.

These segments reflect two broader orientations toward migration and staying. One group—Resolved and Relational Stayers—remains in place with conviction, rooted in family ties, social responsibility, or transformed life projects. The other—Aspirational but Structurally Blocked—continues to imagine movement but is held back by economic barriers, legal status, or the emotional wear of interrupted trajectories. These patterns emerged through qualitative analysis of life histories, focus groups, and interviews, where individuals expressed both pragmatic and affective dimensions of staying. While some participants described immobility as chosen and stabilizing, others framed it as a provisional, frustrating, or even painful condition.

What emerges is not a simple binary between movers and stayers, but a spectrum of immobility, shaped by structural limitations, social identities, migration histories, and deeply personal narratives. In Mexico, immobility is often gendered, generational, and unevenly distributed. Women tend to remain due to caregiving or community roles, while youth often express desires to leave but feel stalled. For returnees, immobility can signal both reintegration and loss. And for migrants from other countries—particularly those who sought asylum or protection—staying can reflect both resistance and refuge. In all cases, the decision to stay is neither static nor singular, but layered, negotiated, and continually reinterpreted.

6.2.1. Segment 1: Resolved and Relational Stayers

In Segment 1, which includes just over half the Mexico sample (56%), aspiration to

migrate is largely absent. Over 70% of individuals report that they expect to remain in their current community over the next five years taking into account both voluntary or involuntary reasons for leaving in the future. Nearly 93% say they have never even considered leaving. The future is anchored, and the past provides continuity: almost 90% of these individuals live in households with no migration experience in the last five years, and a similar percentage report that no one else in the household is currently considering leaving. This is not passive immobility; it is a state of rootedness that is internalized and shared across generations. This logic appears in both survey data and interviews. People stay not because they are stuck, but because leaving does not feature in their imagined futures.

This aspiration structure is visible across both individual and household-level indicators. Individuals in Segment 1 express not only the intent to stay, but also a preference to stay, even under ideal conditions—over 60% say they would remain in Mexico even if they were given money and papers. Migration preparation is almost nonexistent, and household dynamics reflect similar stillness: over 80% report no one in the household desires to migrate.

Compared to Segment 2, individuals in Segment 1 live in smaller households (mean size of 2) and report higher total hours worked (41), suggesting a capacity for self-sufficiency and an embeddedness in household routines. Some have migrated in the past (14%), often to the United States, and now remain by choice—shaped by age, health, or family obligation. Others have never left, and never planned to. For them, migration is not rejected. Rather, it is not in their horizon of possibility.

6.2.1.1. Subtype A: Strategic Returnees and Settled Providers

This subtype includes men who previously migrated, primarily to the United States, and have since returned to Mexico with intention and clarity. Their immobility is not framed as constraint but as the result of fulfilled aspirations and a redefined sense of purpose. Migration was once a real and often realized ambition, but it no longer aligns with their life stage, familial obligations, or personal priorities. For them, staying is not about failure to move but about resolution—an intentional conclusion shaped by shifting values and responsibilities. Salvador, 52, who irregularly crossed the U.S. border six times as a young man, working in Texas and California, talks often about his children and the business he wants to start. Asked if he would go back, he shakes his head: “My family is here. I do what I can without hiding”.

These men often act as household anchors—primary breadwinners embedded in multigenerational homes—and continue to contribute economically and emotionally to their communities. The LCA data reinforce this profile, showing higher reported work hours (41.44), smaller household sizes (2), and lower indicators of anxiety (5.54%)compared to other segments. Importantly, their capabilities are sufficient to sustain local livelihoods. They maintain informal businesses (24.71%), engage in trades like construction or carpentry, and provide stability within their families. Their decisions are informed by econom-

ic pragmatism and an understanding that their labor and presence yield more value at home than abroad.

What unites this group is a shared orientation toward closure and relational investment. Their staying reflects not only structural stability but a psychological shift; they have reframed success through presence, care, and community engagement rather than continued mobility. Their language often signals calm finality—tranquility, commitment, and commitment to local contributions.

Narrative Profile: Pablo

Pablo, 56, migrated to the United States 24 years ago in search of work, joining friends who promised opportunity and helped him find employment. For nearly two years, he worked hard, but life abroad felt like confinement. "*It was like a prison,*" he recalls, describing the cycle of long hours, isolation, and the inability to enjoy even small freedoms. When his mother in Mexico became gravely ill, he sent the savings he had accumulated for her operation and made the decision to return permanently.

Since then, Pablo has re-established his life. He has worked across districts—including a stint in Monterrey, which he left due to insecurity. "*I saw 11 people hanging from a bridge,*" he says, recalling the fear that drove him to return to Mexico City. Though the wages were higher, safety and stability mattered more.

Now studying Mathematical Engineering at the Politécnico, Pablo supports himself with part-time work. Staying, for him, is a conscious choice grounded in family, familiarity, and a future he's building on his own terms: "*Here, I'm going to make it.*"

6.2.1.2. Subtype B: Care-Entrenched and Anchored Women

This subtype includes women—both Mexican and foreign-born—whose immobility is shaped by caregiving responsibilities and relational commitment. Unlike male returnees in Subtype A, these women have never migrated from Mexico. Their decision to stay is not about closure or completed migration arcs, but about continuity—staying grounded because others depend on them. Their immobility emerges from moral duty, family stability, and the quiet logic of caregiving as a central life function. Maria Zavaleta, a middle-aged woman from Nezahualcóyotl sharing a home with her son shows the suffering that would cause family separation due to migration: "*The migration of my brother*

really affected my father—he was sad and kept asking him not to go... the family stayed behind crying, worried something would happen to him. If I were to leave, I'd have to leave my son here. He would be worried, and so would I." (Woman, 47, Nezahualcóyotl)

These women are not highly resourced, but they are stably embedded. Third-step LCA data show that Segment 1 respondents—especially those with caregiving roles—tend to live in smaller households (2 members) and report lower levels of migration preparation (18%). They are more likely to be out of the formal labor force (38.5%), or engaged in low-wage or gendered forms of part-time work (24.5%). Their care work (12.57 domestic work hours)—childrearing, cooking, coordinating, protecting—may not register in employment statistics, but it structures the daily reality of the household.

Narrative Profile: Carmina

Carmina arrived in Mexico with her 10-year-old son Jason after fleeing political repression and economic instability in Cuba. A former factory supervisor, she embarked on a difficult journey through Guyana, Brazil, and Nicaragua, ultimately reaching Mexico via Tapachula, where she secured permanent residency. Her decision to migrate was shaped by threats from authorities, discriminatory violence, and a pressing need for safety and a better future for her children.

Now working at OXXO in Mexico City, Carmina values the security and acceptance she's found in her new community. "*I feel like home here,*" she says. Despite past traumas and a recent housing setback, she remains committed to staying and building a stable life. She lost the money she had saved for rent due to a bad experience with a rental arrangement, which she describes as a very bitter and painful situation. Though she left two adult children and grandchildren in Cuba, her ultimate goal is family reunification in Mexico.

6.2.1.3. Subtype C: Rooted by Aspiration

This subtype includes foreigners who stay in Mexico not out of necessity or family obligation, but out of fulfilled aspirations. These narratives reflect not loss, but arrival. An example is Graciela, now in her mid-sixties, who fled Cuba and arrived in Mexico hoping only for safety and legal protection, but quickly found something more: spiritual freedom, meaningful routines, and intergenerational

purpose. She now lives with her grandson in a modest apartment near her church, where she volunteers regularly and leads women's prayer groups. Her interview is full of quiet but unmistakable gratitude: "*Here I found peace,*" she says. What distinguishes this smaller group is not only their outlook, but their autonomy. They possess sufficient legal status, housing stability, and self-defined goals to support a dignified life. Their staying is not a consequence of blocked aspiration, but a fulfillment of it. Their narratives are suffused with conviction: religious calling, moral clarity, or a meritocratic refusal to depend on others.

Narrative Profile: Jorge Ramiro

Jorge Ramiro, 37, migrated from Venezuela on his own, crossing through Central America with no coyote and only the plan he built from YouTube research. He now works near his home in a tortilla factory, sends money to invest in livestock back home, and takes pride in doing things "*without anyone's help*". "*Here I feel good,*" he says. "*I am working, I am calm and I plan everything for and by myself*" He doesn't trust governments—not Venezuela's, not Mexico's, and certainly not the U.S.—but he trusts himself. He initially imagining the United States as his ultimate destination. However, since settling in Mexico City, his perspective has shifted. What he believed they would find in the U.S.—stability, safety, and the possibility to build a life—he has found in Mexico. Staying, for Jorge Ramiro, is autonomy in action.

6.2.2. Segment 2: Aspirational but Structurally Blocked

Segment 2, comprising 44% of the Mexico sample, is defined by the tension between aspiration to migrate but lacking capacity to do so. These individuals are not forcibly confined—but they lack the income, stability, or institutional access to convert migration intent into movement. The legal right to migrate—may still exist, but the capability to exercise that right—is constrained by chronic economic vulnerability, household load, and weakened support systems.

While nearly all respondents in Segment 1 report that they plan to stay and have never considered migrating, here 91.5% have thought about leaving, and nearly 95% say they would go if given the opportunity such as documents or resources. Only 17% plan to remain. Some have already taken preparatory steps (61%) —researching destinations, con-

tacting relatives abroad, or exploring logistics. Third-step Latent Class Analysis (LCA) explains this gap between aspiration and action.

Economic precarity is pronounced in Segment 2: members report higher unemployment (20.81%), fewer hours worked (29.24), and more irregular labor profiles (27.63% of informal work). They rank themselves lower on the household wealth ladder (6.45 on a scale from 1 to 10), express less satisfaction with their financial situation (2.97 on a scale from 1 to 5), and often live in larger households (3.09 mean size)—not as a sign of support, but as a burden, with more dependents and fewer resources per capita. Unlike Segment 1, this group often lives in households that are more aspirationally divided: over half report that someone in the household currently wants to migrate, and about 30–50% have past migration experience. The household, in these cases, may contain both desire and inertia. The result is what one interviewee called "staying for now."

6.2.2.1. Subtype A: Blocked Youth and Caregivers

Subtype A includes a group of young adults—both Mexican and foreign-born—who share a clear and persistent desire to migrate, yet find themselves unable to act on it. They imagine better lives elsewhere, driven by visions of safety, economic advancement, or personal growth. However, their aspirations are consistently interrupted by a combination of caregiving obligations, emotional bonds, and economic fragility. These individuals are often deeply embedded in family systems, serving as caregivers, providers, or emotional anchors. Their immobility is not the product of settlement or choice, but of obligation and structural limitation. "*Here we cannot grow.*" says Daniel, a 25-year-old from Mexico City who lives with his mother and grandmother. He works in informal construction jobs, dreams of building something better abroad, and imagines life in the U.S. as "*a way to develop.*"

Quantitative data from the third-step Latent Class Analysis (LCA) confirms this vulnerability. They report higher unemployment rates (20.81%), larger household sizes (3.09), and lower perceived economic well-being (6.45 on a scale from 1 to 10). Their staying is shaped not only by a lack of money or legal status, but by intense relational demands: parents who rely on them, children who require constant care, or family structures too fragile to withstand their absence. Among foreign-born youth, these constraints are even more layered. Their ability to migrate—is eroded not by legal restrictions alone, but by the cumulative pressure of economic and emotional interdependence.

Among the Mexicans in this group, the aspiration is often framed through local frustration: violence, dead-end work, or intra-household tension. Yet they also describe migration as a rupture too large to risk. The tension between aspiration and inaction is particularly sharp among women in this group, who often shoulder unpaid caregiving roles that further limit their mobility. While some, particularly men, keep migration in view as a distant possibility, most are not actively planning or preparing to leave. Instead, they live in prolonged suspension.

Narrative Profile: Daniel

Daniel, 33, lives in San José de Yoyó and carries a deep and persistent desire to migrate—especially to the United States. His motivation stems largely from economic frustration: while jobs exist in Mexico, they often demand credentials and certifications he doesn't have. The opportunities to grow or secure financial stability feel increasingly out of reach. He imagines migration as a pathway to security and peace, particularly in the face of rising violence and social decay in his community. For David, the U.S. represents not wealth, but a reprieve from the instability he sees around him.

Despite his longing to leave, Daniel remains in Mexico due to the caregiving role he plays at home. His mother and sister rely on him emotionally and practically, and he cannot imagine abandoning them without support. "*If it were just me, I'd go,*" he says, but the thought of leaving his family vulnerable keeps him rooted. With no financial or logistical support to migrate legally, and deep personal responsibilities at home, his immobility is shaped less by choice than by duty.

6.2.2.2. Subtype B: Ideological or Cultural Cosmopolitans

This subgroup is defined by the aspiration to migrate, which is blocked by structural or relational constraints and emerges as a distinctive subgroup composed entirely of women. These individuals still imagine migration but engage with that aspiration through critique, caution, and reflective distance. Urban, often educated, and politically or culturally aware, they question the dominant view of migration as success.

Their staying is not due to fulfilment, nor entirely to constraint, but to a complex negotiation of identity, value alignment, and emotional safety. Unlike the youth caregivers in Subtype A immobilized by family duties, or the worn-down workers we will discuss in Subtype C, these individuals have not been drained by caregiving or structural exhaustion. For the foreign-born, their status complicates their place in Mexico: they are not fully settled, yet they also do not idealize movement. Their staying reflects a nuanced position—neither resignation nor resolve, but a pause rooted in reflection.

Emotional safety and dignity play a subtle yet decisive role in their decisions. For some, like a queer Venezuelan woman in the group, the U.S. poses risks of marginalization and conditional acceptance. In contrast, Mexico—though imperfect—offers emotional grounding and space to exist more fully. Still, their chosen immobility may mask deeper vulnerabilities: irregular work, institutional distrust, or housing insecurity. Their staying may sometimes serve

to dignify constrained realities—but this too reflects agency. They remain in Segment 2 not because they are preparing to leave imminently, but because migration remains alive in their thoughts, even if deferred or debated.

Narrative Profile: Andrés

Andrés, a gay man from El Salvador, never intended to stay in Mexico. Initially denied refuge in Guatemala and fleeing threats of violence in his home country—where two of his relatives had already been killed for being gay—Andrés saw Mexico only as a stop on a longer journey. But what began as necessity gradually became refuge. In El Salvador, he faced daily danger; in Mexico, he found a fragile but real sense of emotional safety. Shelters like *La 72* offered him not only protection but also purpose—within a week, he was cooking for hundreds, decorating for holidays, and bringing joy to others even while healing his own trauma.

Now, Andrés sees Mexico as a place where he can build a dignified life. Though he still struggles with memories of assault during his migration and faces the practical challenges of work and study, he is anchored by faith, gratitude, and the chance to live openly. "*I stay for stability and emotional safety,*" he says, describing a decision born not out of resignation, but from clarity. Andrés's story is an example of how emotional dignity—not just legal status or economic need—can be the most decisive factor in choosing to stay.

6.2.2.3. Subtype C: Exhausted and Acquiescent Stayers

This subtype encompasses Mexican and foreign nationals mostly from Venezuela and Central America for whom migration has ceased to be an active aspiration, though its absence continues to generate emotional strain, disillusionment, or residual longing. Distinct from those who remain by choice, duty, or reflective critique, these individuals exhibit a form of immobility shaped by weariness and diminished hope. Their narratives reflect emotional withdrawal and resignation. Many are former migrants who returned under adverse conditions—such as injury, deportation, or unmet expectations. For foreign nationals—especially Venezuelans, Cubans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans—the US-Mexican border is an active system of exclusion. The invoking of Title 42 during the COVID-19 pandemic,[1] asylum backlogs, the recent re-

1. Title 42, a public-health authority invoked from 2020 to 2023, was used to expel nearly 3 million migrants without due asylum processes, marking a major shift in U.S. immigration policy. However, it was ultimately ineffective in shutting down the border, as migrant encounters and repeat crossings surged during its enforcement. Muzaffar Chishti, Kathleen Bush-Joseph, and Julia Montalvo, "Title 42 Postmortem: U.S. Pandemic-Era Expulsions Policy Did Not Shut Down the Border," Migration Policy Institute, 2024, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/title-42-autopsy.

strictive policies passed under the Trump administration, as well as Mexican containment policies mean that even when aspiration is high, mobility is institutionally shut down[2].

Some speak of trying and failing. Others remain in limbo. Although their current narratives suggest low or absent aspiration, these individuals are still part of Segment 2 because they once aspired to move—and may still indicate, in survey responses, that they would migrate if resources or legal barriers were removed. These individuals are stranded between past mobility and future uncertainty, having once pursued destinations such as the United States or Europe, but now face institutional barriers, economic strain, and emotional fatigue. Although the aspiration to migrate may still linger, it is weakened by bureaucratic failures, legal precarity, and recurring disappointments. Their staying reflects not fulfillment, but resignation—a sense that moving forward is no longer viable, and returning home is either undesirable or unfeasible.

The LCA profile matches these stories: low migration preparation (61%), low financial satisfaction (2.97 on a 1 to 5 scale), higher unemployment (20.8%), and a general absence of forward-facing planning. While direct references to violence or displacement are rare in this group, emotional erosion (23.6%) and systemic distrust (1.7 on a 1-4 scale) often point to deeper histories of

2. Muzaffar Chishti and Kathleen Bush-Joseph, "In First 100 Days, Trump 2.0 Has Dramatically Reshaped the U.S. Immigration System, but Is Not Meeting Mass Deportation Aims," Migration Policy Institute, 2025, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trump-2-immigration-first-100-days

Narrative Profile: Luis Miguel

Luis Miguel, a man from Venezuela, embodies the profile of an exhausted and acquiescent stayer. His original goal was to reach the United States, driven by the desire to offer a better future to his children and support his aging parents. He migrated through Peru and Chile before crossing the Darién Gap and eventually arriving in Mexico, enduring hardship and violence along the way. "*We didn't achieve the goal. I came with a goal, which was the United States... I have nothing to do, nothing to look for in any other place that isn't that goal. I have to go back to where I was,*" he explains with quiet resignation.

Now living in Mexico and working in a factory, Luis survives but is disillusioned with the quality of life. "*I don't like the economy; I don't like the quality of life here,*" he says, comparing it unfavorably with his time in Chile. He vividly recalls the daily stress of seeking a CBP One appointment via the U.S. government's app for asylum seekers: "*Every day at 11 a.m., check it. It was stressful.*" Though he has paused his journey, his hope remains dormant. "*If the page opens again, I'm going. I'm going anyway.*"

insecurity. Disconnection from institutions, silence about past movement, and the flattening of aspiration may reflect unspoken trauma—from detention, deportation, or persistent exclusion. Here immobility is not only economic—it is also a form of self-protection, a way to lower risk after too many experiences of past failure.

6.3. The logics behind aspirations and capabilities in Mexico

Section 6.2 showed that immobility in Mexico takes many forms—some intentional, others imposed. Some people stay because their lives are rooted in stability and relationships. Others stay because their aspirations exceed their capacity to act. The difference lies not only in individual preferences, but in structure: in whether people have the resources, security, and social position to translate aspiration into action. This section examines the broader forces shaping that dynamic.

6.3.1. Care and the Weight of the Household

In Mexico, the household is both a site of support and a source of constraint. In Segment 1, intergenerational households offer structure for staying. Returnees and older providers build futures around caregiving, economic contribution, and family continuity. These households absorb risk, pool resources, and stabilize decisions. LCA data show that Segment 1 households tend to be moderately sized (2) and multigenerational, with relatively higher work hours (41.44) and financial satisfaction (3.3 on a 1-5 scale).

In Segment 2, larger households are more common—but far less stabilizing. Young adults, especially women, stay not because they are supported by others, but because they are supporting everyone else. They provide care for children, parents, siblings. They delay their own movement because others depend on their presence. While aspiration remains high, capability is redistributed outward. What looks like household cohesion often conceals hidden obligation, especially among young women and undocumented caregivers. Here, the household does not enable staying—it consumes the ability to move.

6.3.2. Legal Limbo and the U.S. Border as Invisible Fence

For foreign nationals in Segment 2, the largest structural constraint is not personal—it is geopolitical. They are stuck not only in households or low-income neighborhoods, but in a legal trap: neither deported nor granted legal status, neither enabled to move on nor supported to stay. Some have pending asylum cases. Others are undocumented and afraid to move. Still others—especially from Venezuela and Cuba—face policies that invisibly enforce immobility, especially considering recent U.S. policy changes under the Trump administration, especially following the announcement to terminate humanitarian parole programs.[1]

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1. Muzaffar Chishti and Kathleen Bush-Joseph, "In His First 100 Days, Trump 2.0 Has Dramatically Reshaped the U.S. Immigration System But Falling Short on Mass Deportation Targets," Migration Policy Institute, 2025,

In this context, the U.S.–Mexico border functions as an invisible fence: a system of migration deterrence that stretches southward through the externalization of enforcement. These individuals are immobile not because they want to be, but because the legal pathways to mobility are closed—and the risks of trying to migrate irregularly are too great. Unlike the returnees in Segment 1 who have reintegrated or reconciled with immobility, individuals in Segment 2 are suspended in place, lacking both viable destinations and institutional mechanisms to support either mobility or stable settlement.

Transit migrants and Mexican nationals both face legal and institutional barriers to mobility, but for transit migrants—especially those from Venezuela, Cuba, Honduras, or El Salvador—sudden and drastic shifts in migration policy, such as the de facto ended access to asylum at the U.S.–Mexico border, tend to have more immediate and severe consequences, often leaving them stranded mid-journey with no clear path forward.

6.3.3. The Institutional Vacuum and Stalled Aspirations

For individuals in Segment 2, immobility often emerges not from resolved intention but from the gradual depletion of capacity to act. Migration is frequently described as an enduring aspiration—one that, over time, becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. This is particularly evident among foreign-born individuals and young adults in caregiving roles, whose responsibilities or past migration failures erode confidence in the feasibility of leaving. Aspirational fatigue sets in, not as a shift in desire, but as a pragmatic response to accumulated setbacks. Mobility is not rejected; it is deferred until the possibility itself becomes emotionally and logistically untenable.

This erosion of aspiration and capability is exacerbated by the absence of institutional infrastructure. There are no reintegration pathways for returning migrants, no psychosocial programs for immobile youth, no consistent documentation services for refugees and asylum seekers. Trust in institutions is low (1.76 on a 1-4 scale, in Segment 1) —especially in Segment 2 (1.71)—and few respondents describe receiving assistance beyond basic shelter or sporadic NGO contact. For those in Segment 1, immobility is internally sustained—but unacknowledged by public systems. For many in Segment 2, staying is harder than leaving ever was.

Economic precarity compounds these dynamics. While some respondents in more stable jobs report aspirations to settle, the majority of Segment 2 remains in informal or underpaid work, with little prospect of financial improvement. This weak labor position not only limits mobility options but also undermines personal autonomy and planning capacity. In this context, staying is less a strategic decision and more a byproduct of structural abandonment.

https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trump-2-immigration-first-100-days.

6.4. Program and Policy Recommendations in Mexico

6.4.1. Program Recommendations

6.4.1.1. Gender-Responsive Economic Opportunities for Immobile Women

Women in Mexico City—particularly those classified as Care-Entrenched and Anchored Women—often remain immobile due to deeply embedded caregiving responsibilities and gendered expectations. In the fields of gender equity and economic autonomy, non-governmental and development organizations should expand programs that combine vocational and entrepreneurial training and stipend-supported apprenticeships. These programs should be flexible, care-compatible, and rooted in urban realities, such as informal employment and unpaid domestic labor. In this regard, collaborative work with the private sector is essential to design equity plans that include labor migrant populations. By recognizing the unpaid care burden and offering economic alternatives, organizations can turn structural immobility into a space for empowerment and agency.

6.4.1.2. Youth Empowerment through Life Planning and Skills Development

Young people in marginalized areas of Mexico City often fall into the category of Blocked Youth and Caregivers, caught between aspirations to migrate and a lack of pathways to do so. Non-governmental development organizations could deepen their youth work through programs that provide structured mentoring, psychosocial accompaniment, and digital and life skills training that respond to both their ambitions and the constraints they face. These programs may not only support youth economically but also help them reimagine immobility as a valid stage of growth, not a symbol of failure.

6.4.1.3. Legal and Social Support for Migrants and Returnees Anchoring in Place

Foreign-born migrants and returnees in Mexico City—especially those from Haiti, Venezuela, and the Northern Triangle—face significant legal and bureaucratic barriers that contribute to involuntary immobility. Non-governmental development organizations can invest in mobile legal clinics, legal orientation workshops, referral systems for state services, and reintegration measures for deported persons. Ayuda en Acción's engagement with mobile legal clinics and rights education should be expanded to include legal orientation workshops, referral systems for service access, and reintegration circles for deported individuals. Such efforts help reframe immobility from a state of exclusion into one of safety, recovery, and reintegration.

6.4.1.4. Promote Narrative Change through Community Storytelling and Mentoring

Social stigma around immobility remains high—particularly among youth and re-

turnees, who often perceive staying as evidence of personal failure. In the areas of community empowerment and narrative change, non-governmental development organizations can launch storytelling initiatives led by youth and migrant groups to highlight resilience, care, and conviction as reasons for staying. Additionally, mentorship programs led by returnees could be created to highlight the value of staying rooted and to share how migration can serve as a way to transfer skills, knowledge, and culture. These narratives can challenge dominant migration discourses and foster social cohesion in diverse and precarious urban contexts.

6.4.2. Policy Recommendations

6.4.2.1. Integrate Immobile Populations into Urban Social Programs

Many city-level social policies overlook those who remain in place under constraint—caregivers, informal workers, returnees, and undocumented migrants. Public bodies should include and formally recognize immobile populations in Mexico City's development and social protection plans, with a particular focus on boroughs such as Iztapalapa and Gustavo A. Madero. Recognizing immobility as a legitimate and vulnerable condition would enable more accurate targeting of services and development resources.

6.4.2.2. Ensure Access to Services for Status-Insecure Migrants

Irregular and asylum-seeking migrants often face barriers to enrolling in public education, accessing health care, or securing housing. Public authorities should guarantee inclusive municipal service access, including temporary municipal IDs, open enrollment in schools and clinics, and support for undocumented renters. Ensuring basic rights regardless of legal status is key to protecting populations who are stuck in legal and logistical limbo. It is especially important to resume issuing Humanitarian Visitor Cards (TVRH), as they provide safety for people in transit and improve access to basic rights, making it easier for them to settle in their new host communities.

6.4.2.3. Promoting regularization options for migrants in transit

Individuals who have not yet secured their migration plans in Mexico remain in a vulnerable situation, as they are unable to access regularization processes that would grant them rights. The Humanitarian Visitor Card (TVRH), which has been suspended since October 2023, had previously served as a pathway to regularization for many migrants and asylum seekers. Many migrants' rights organizations urge the reinstatement of TVRH issuance so that people in transit—particularly the most vulnerable, such as asylum seekers—can obtain their Unique Population Registry Code (CURP). This would allow them a dignified opportunity for integration and access to formal employment..

6.4.2.4. Advance Gender-Sensitive Urban Care Policies

Care work is a major driver of immobility for women in Mexico City. To support Care-Entrenched Stayers, local governments should promote urban care policies such as publicly funded community childcare, flexible service hours, and stipends or social recognition for unpaid caregivers.

In addition to improving women's access to employment, these policies must promote social recognition of care work through awareness campaigns, skills certifications, and mechanisms for inclusion in social protection systems. Addressing this dimension is key to breaking the cycles of poverty and exclusion that disproportionately affect caregivers, and to advancing toward a more equitable city where well-being and opportunities are not determined by gender or household family structure.

6.4.2.5. Develop Reintegration Frameworks for Urban Returnees

Returnees, particularly those deported from the U.S., often face stigma, administrative exclusion, and difficulty accessing services in Mexico City. A municipal reintegration framework, co-developed with civil society, could offer legal counseling, psychosocial support, job readiness training, and short-term housing assistance. These interventions would allow returnees to stabilize and reintegrate with dignity, transforming involuntary immobility into an opportunity for belonging and economic recovery.

Graph 5. Segmentation Visualization in Mexico

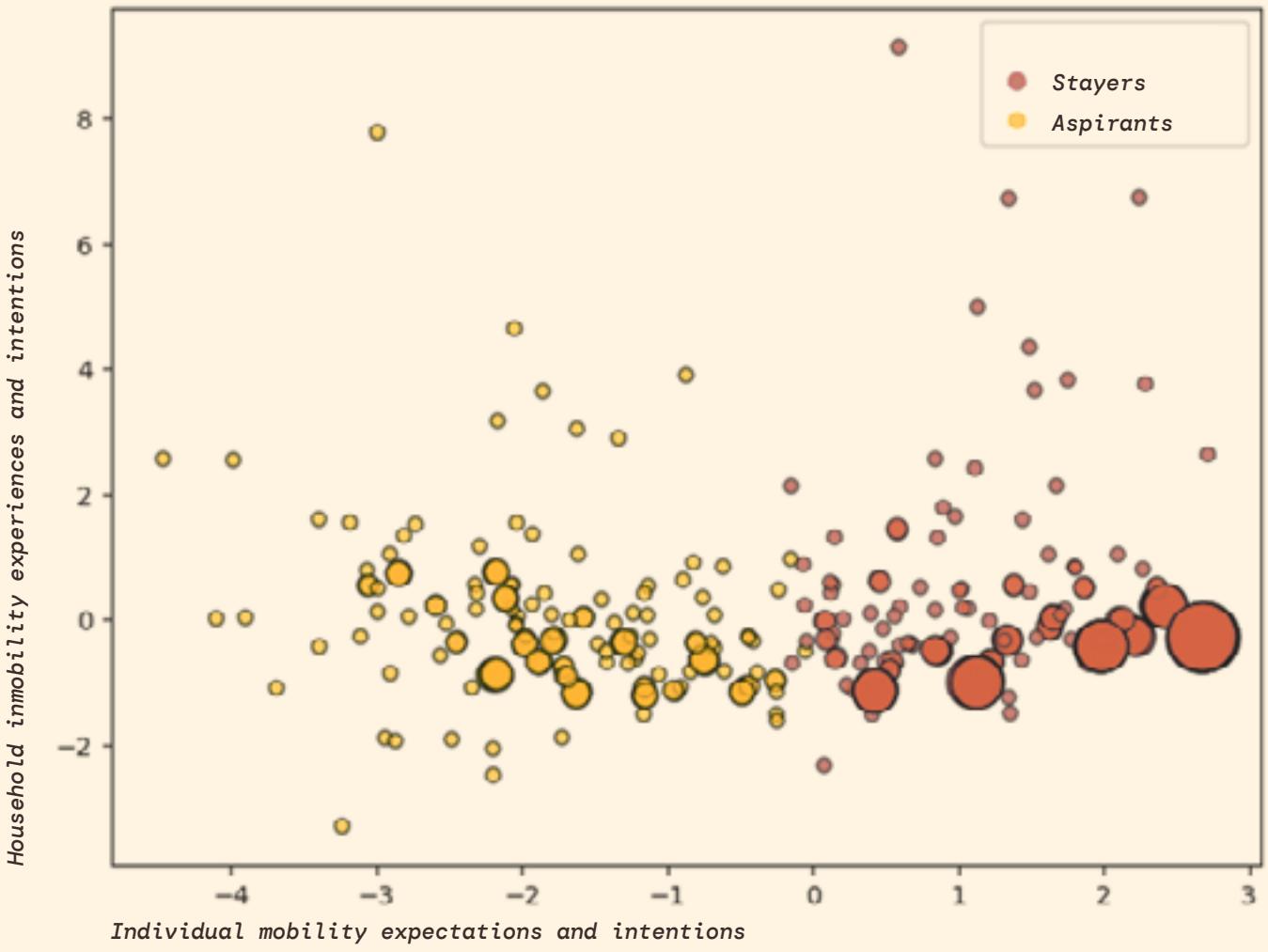


Table 13. Aspirations in Mexico

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Significance Comparison	Overall
Segment Size	56%	44%		
Individual (% Stay)				
Did not prepare to leave the country in last 5 years	Very High (82%)	Low (39%)	a	63%
Did not consider leaving country last 12 months	Very High (93%)	Very Low (9%)	a	56%
Did not consider leaving community last 12 months	Very High (82%)	Medium (51%)	a	68%
Would like to stay	High (73%)	Very Low (10%)	a	45%
Even if given documents, would stay in country	High (62%)	Very Low (6%)	a	37%
Think will still be here in 5 years	High (73%)	Very Low (17%)	a	48%
Household (% Stay)				
You or someone in household did not leave last 5 years	Very High (89%)	High (80%)	a	85%
Nobody close (family or friend) left last 5 years	Very High (86%)	High (70%)	a	79%
You or someone in household do not migrate cyclically	High (70%)	Medium (52%)	a	62%
Nobody in your household wants to leave	High (80%)	Medium (46%)	a	65%

Note: Significance comparison indicates a significant difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a: segment 1 and segment 2.

Table 14. Characteristics and Capabilities in Mexico

	Segment 1: Stayers	Segment 2: Aspirants	Significance Comparison
Demographics (Respondent)			a
Sex: *Female*	42.31%	44.91%	a
Age (mean)	33.88	33.22	
Education (years)	13.22	14.18	
Civil Status: *With Partner*	32.40%	28.70%	
Region: Mexico City (vs. Metropolitan area)	84.66%	83.00%	
Household Structure and Livelihood			
Household Assets (Index 0 to 1)	0.79	0.71	
Household Members (mean)	2.00	3.09	a
Property (index 0 to 1)	0.40	0.39	
Main income source: Self-employed	55.78%	53.81%	a
Main income source: Formal work	38.52%	18.56%	
Main income source: Informal work	5.70%	27.63%	
Main income source: Subsidies/transfers	-	-	
Remunerated Work Hours (weekly, mean)	41.44	29.24	a
Domestic Work Hours (weekly, mean)	12.57	14.39	
Household tenure: Rented	90.75%	89.85%	
Household tenure: Owned by family or household member	9.25%	10.15%	
Gender norms (index 0 to 1)	0.17	0.24	a
Savings	63.45%	45.35%	

Loans	25.63%	29.39%	
Digital Wallet	23.52%	11.36%	
Household SES (0 to 10)	6.97	6.45	a
Financial Satisfaction (very bad 1 to 5 very good)	3.3	2.97	
Health Status (Respondent)			
Expected Health and Education (mean)	2.2	2.16	
Good Physical Health (good and very good)	3.66	3.6	
Mental Health (Anxiety Disorder)	5.54%	23,56%	
Optimism	4.74	4.64	
Conflict and Stress (Household)			
Climate Stress	14.08%	18.38%	
Violence Experienced	44.54%	66.21%	
Land Conflict	75.34%	59.37%	
Water Conflict	67.99%	57.30%	
Security Issues (mean 1 to 4)	2.38	2.2	
Trust (1 to 4): Government	1.76	1.71	
Mobility Knowledge			
Mobility Knowledge (index 1 to 2)	1.73	1.66	a

Note: Significance comparison indicates a significant difference of at least 10% of the p-value between segments: a:segment1 and segment 2.

Table 15. Immobility Subtypes in Mexico

Subtype	Segment	Core Logic	Aspiration Level	Capabilities	Typical Profile
Strategic Returnees and Settled Providers	Segment 1: Resolved and Relational Stayers	Staying framed as resolution after fulfilled migration	Resolved or absent	Moderate	Men with past U.S. migration, now home as family anchors
Care-Entrenched and Anchored Women	Segment 1: Resolved and Relational Stayers	Staying framed as caregiving duty and moral stability	Low or redirected	Low to moderate	Women managing households, often mothers or caretakers
Rooted by Aspiration	Segment 1: Resolved and Relational Stayers	Staying as fulfillment of self-defined goals and autonomy	Fulfilled or non-migratory	Moderate to high	Foreign-born with legal status, spiritual or independent purpose
Blocked Youth and Caregivers	Segment 2: Aspirational but Structurally Blocked	Aspiration blocked by caregiving and economic limits	High	Low	Young people or caregivers without financial or logistical means
Ideological or Cultural Cosmopolitans	Segment 2: Aspirational but Structurally Blocked	Aspirational pause shaped by critique and emotional safety	Moderate, reflective	Moderate	Urban, often educated women weighing identity and safety
Exhausted and Acquiescent Stayees	Segment 2: Aspirational but Structurally Blocked	Immobility as resignation after failed migration or exclusion	Once high, now eroded	Low	Former migrants or asylum seekers facing barriers and burnout

7. Comparative Insights from Africa and Latin America

7.1. Introduction

This chapter presents a comparative synthesis of findings from five country case studies from Africa (Mali, Ethiopia) and Latin America (Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico), each shaped by different configurations of constraint, care, and choice. These cases span pastoralist communities navigating climate collapse and conflict, urban returnees living with migration trauma, displaced populations negotiating bureaucratic exclusion, and households rooted in caregiving roles. While the reasons for staying vary, shared patterns emerge. This chapter draws those patterns into focus while honoring the distinct logics that shape immobility in each place.

We organize this comparative analysis in two parts. First, we present a typology of immobility developed from quantitative and qualitative data across all five countries. This typology captures how aspirations and capabilities interact to produce different forms of staying. Second, we explore six cross-cutting dynamics that shape the experience and meaning of immobility across contexts, including the roles of gender, age, trauma, and institutional failure.

Rather than flatten national differences, the goal is to illuminate how seemingly disparate forms of immobility are shaped by overlapping structural and relational forces: gendered care burdens, life-course transitions, histories of violence and displacement, legal precarity, and eroding livelihoods. Together, these insights provide an analytical foundation for the policy and programmatic recommendations that follow in Chapter 8.

7.1.1. Purpose of Comparison

This comparative chapter serves three key purposes. First, to validate the typology of immobility developed in the study across diverse geographies and social contexts, demonstrating its analytical relevance and adaptability. Second, to identify cross-cutting patterns and divergences in how aspiration, capability, and constraint interact—shaped by life stage, gender, displacement history, household role, and institutional presence. And third, to inform context-sensitive programming and advocacy, enabling donors, governments, and civil society actors to support those who stay—not as a default category, but as individuals navigating risk, responsibility, and interdependence.

This is not simply an academic exercise. It is a strategic one. By understanding how and why people stay under different conditions,

we can design responses that are attuned to people's lived realities—responses that are inclusive, care-aware, and capable of supporting mobility and immobility with equal dignity.

7.1.2. Shared Conceptual Framework

All five country studies are grounded in a common analytical framework that sees immobility as shaped by the interaction between aspiration—the desire to migrate—and capability—the ability to act on that desire. This framework allows us to distinguish among different types of immobility: (a) Voluntary immobility: when people can migrate but choose to stay; (b) Involuntary immobility: when people want to migrate but cannot; and (c) Acquiescent immobility: when people neither want nor are able to migrate.

This study expands on that framework in two critical ways.

First, it adopts a life-course perspective, recognizing that aspirations and capabilities are not static. They shift with age, experience, family responsibilities, and migration history. A young woman may aspire to migrate after finishing school, but caregiving duties or failed migration attempts may reshape that path over time.

Second, it incorporates a care lens, highlighting how gendered responsibilities—particularly caregiving—structure people's ability and willingness to move. Across all five countries, we find that immobility is rarely an individual decision. It is deeply relational, negotiated within households and influenced by moral obligation, emotional bonds, and family strategies.

Together, these perspectives allow for a deeper understanding of how people stay—not just because of what they want or what they can do, but because of who they care for, what they've experienced, and how they weigh risk against responsibility. Immobility, in this light, is not simply the absence of migration. It is a condition—and sometimes a strategy—shaped by age, gender, trauma, governance, and the quiet work of holding life together.

7.2. Typological Patterns Across Countries

Understanding immobility requires more than identifying who stays—it requires insight into how and why they stay. This section presents a typology of immobility developed from both quantitative and qualitative data across the five countries studied. It classifies individuals not simply by their migration status, but by the intersection of their aspirations, capabilities, constraints, and lived experiences.

The result is a shared typological framework that is both statistically grounded and narrative-rich. While profiles manifest differently across settings, they reflect recurrent combinations of aspiration, capability, care responsibility, and constraint. These configurations are summarized in the table below.

Table 1. Typology of Immobility: Aspirations-Capabilities Configurations

Subtype	Aspiration to Migrate	Capability to Migrate	Interpretation
Satisfied Strategists	Low–Moderate	High	Could migrate but choose to stay; immobility is strategic and affirming.
Care-Entrenched Stayers	Moderate	Moderate	Stay due to relational obligations; not fully constrained but prioritize care.
Strategic Aspirants	High	Moderate–High	Plan to migrate and are building capacity; staying is deliberate and temporary.
Constrained Aspirants (Care)	High	Low	Want to move but caregiving roles or family expectations block them.
Trauma-Driven Stayees	Moderate–High	Very Low	Stay due to fear, instability, or trauma; immobilized by security or emotional risk.
Acquiescent Immobility	Low	Low	Neither want nor are able to move; immobility is passive or resigned.

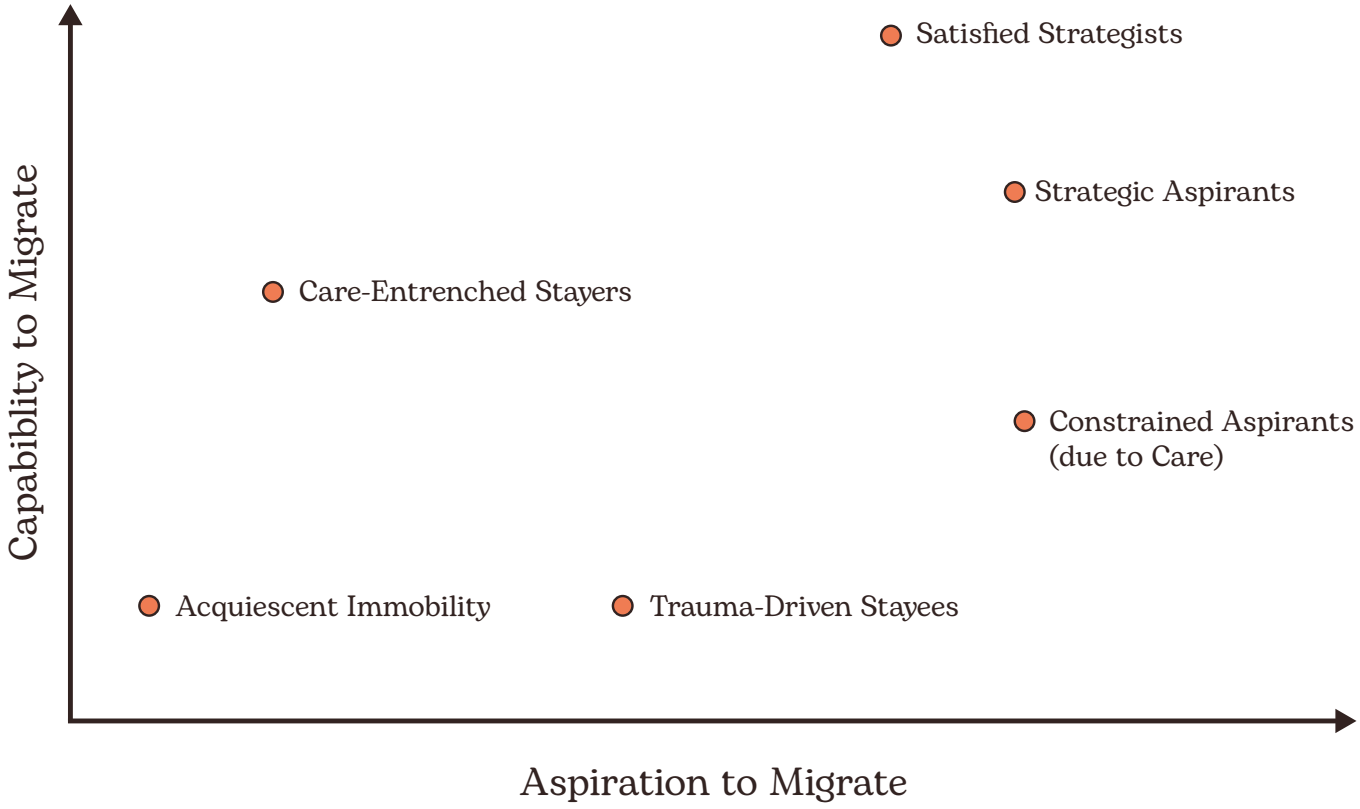
The table above summarizes the five core profiles identified across the study. To further clarify how these profiles relate to one another, we present a conceptual map that positions them along two intersecting axes: aspiration to migrate and capability to act on that aspiration. This figure illustrates that immobility is not a single state, but a constellation of experiences that arise from different positions within this aspiration–capability space.

This figure reinforces the study's core proposition: that immobility results from the intersection of what people hope for and what they can do. For example, Frustrated Aspirants are those whose migration aspirations are blocked by structural constraints—legal, financial, or household-related. Strategic Aspirants wish to migrate but delay doing so due to household responsibilities, caregiving duties, or the calculation that "it's not the right time." Voluntary Stayees possess the capability to move but choose not to, grounded in care, land, identity, or a sense of safety. Acquiescent Stayees, by contrast, often lack both aspiration and capability—they stay because leaving feels impossible or meaningless. And Trauma-Driven Stayees, while hard to position precisely, represent a unique form of constraint: those who once aspired and moved, but no longer do, due to fear, loss, or painful past experiences.

These profiles are not fixed. People move between them across time and circumstance—especially as economic shocks, care obligations, life transitions, or migration attempts reshape their options. What the typology offers is not a rigid taxonomy, but a dynamic comparative map of how immobility is experienced and explained across five countries.

The next section explores the deeper social and structural dynamics that shape and differentiate these profiles across contexts.

Graph 1. Immobility Typology: Aspirations-Capabilities Mapping



7.3. Cross-Cutting Dimensions of Immobility

While the typology presented in the previous section captures the core logics of immobility across five countries, these profiles are not experienced in isolation. Rather, they are shaped by overlapping social, emotional, and structural dynamics that vary across age, gender, household role, migration history, and state presence. This section examines six cross-cutting insights that help explain how immobility is lived, negotiated, and narrated. These insights provide the connective tissue between the typological patterns and the policy and programmatic recommendations that follow in Chapter 8.

7.3.1. Immobility Is Negotiated, Not Decided

Immobility is rarely the result of a single moment or autonomous decision. Across all five countries, respondents describe staying as a process—shaped by evolving obligations, intergenerational coordination, uncertainty, and social negotiation. For many, staying is not a permanent status but a provisional one: an outcome of "not yet," "not now," or "not alone."

In Mali and Ethiopia, this was particularly visible among young men who spoke of "waiting their turn" to migrate. In extended

families, elders or older siblings were first to migrate, while others stayed to care for livestock, children, or aging parents until their own opportunity emerged—often uncertain and delayed. In Colombia and Ecuador, women commonly described putting migration plans on hold to care for children or manage households, with some expressing doubts over whether they still wanted to migrate after years of postponement. What began as a short-term delay sometimes turned into permanent immobility.

Even in Mexico, where many migrants were effectively stuck in urban transit zones, staying was not framed as an endpoint but as a suspended state—awaiting papers, waiting for remittances, or waiting for safe routes to open.

Across contexts, immobility is best understood not as stasis, but as a fluid status: shaped by sequencing within households, moral calculations, and the unequal distribution of decision-making power. Among Strategic Aspirants and Frustrated Aspirants, this negotiation is especially visible—reflecting plans deferred, reconfigured, or shouldered collectively.

7.3.2. Age and Life Stage Reframe Aspiration

Aspirations to migrate are not fixed—they are shaped and reshaped by life stage, social role, and prior experience. Across countries, the desire to move is strongest among youth, but their paths are also the most constrained. Older adults, by contrast, often describe staying as a return to responsibility, stability, or rootedness. These generational differences reflect not just age, but different historical relationships to mobility, livelihood systems, and household obligation.

In Mali, young men described themselves as a "generation-in-waiting." For their parents, seasonal migration was both common and viable. For them, economic instability, insecurity, and climate stress have made those same routes dangerous or inaccessible. While they continue to express strong aspirations to migrate, their paths are blocked—by cost, family expectation, or insecurity—placing them squarely in the Frustrated Aspirants profile.

In Colombia, older returnees often expressed a different view. After years of displacement or circular migration, they now see staying as a conscious choice—one tied to care, reinvestment in land, or reclaiming a sense of community. For many, this shift reflects a move from survival to stewardship, aligning with the Voluntary Stayee profile. Some younger respondents in Colombia and Ecuador also expressed aspirations to migrate, but postponed those plans due to responsibilities or uncertainty—consistent with the Strategic Aspirants category.

In Ethiopia, we see similar generational divergence: while young men weigh migration for labor, older women—especially those who have experienced displacement or widowhood—often remain to manage land, livestock, or caregiving, viewing mobility as either unwise or inappropriate.

Across settings, aspiration evolves. Migration may once have seemed like the only option, but time, trauma, or role shifts reconfigure what feels possible or desirable. The typology reflects this fluidity, but it is age and life stage that often determine how, and when, people move—or stay..

7.3.3. Gender and Care Economies Structure Immobility.

Gender is one of the most consistent forces shaping immobility—but it operates differently across roles, generations, and contexts. For many women, particularly in Colombia, Ecuador, and Ethiopia, staying is structured by caregiving: raising children, supporting elders, or holding households together in the absence of others. These forms of care are rarely short-term; they span years and shape how mobility is postponed, foregone, or reimagined. In contrast, men more often link immobility to blocked provision—where the inability to migrate represents a failure to fulfill provider roles.

In Colombia and Ecuador, women described remaining in place due to childrearing, schooling continuity, or obligations to care for aging or ill relatives. Their staying was often cast in moral or strategic terms: "some-

one has to stay," "I couldn't leave my father," or "the children need me here." These women often match the Voluntary Stayee or Strategic Aspirant profiles—not because they lack the desire or means to migrate, but because they assume the emotional and logistical work of anchoring families.

In Mali, men described feelings of stagnation and shame linked to immobility—especially when they could not contribute to household income. For some, the inability to migrate for seasonal labor—once a family norm—has upended masculine identities tied to provision. These frustrations are central to the Frustrated Aspirant profile. In Ethiopia, similar tensions emerged, though women often framed staying in terms of responsibility and security, while men weighed movement against household survival strategies.

Yet gender roles are not fixed. In Mexico, both men and women take on caregiving and strategic planning. Some men assume domestic duties after failed migration or deportation; some women plan for family mobility. This fluidity challenges traditional assumptions about who stays and why—and underscores the importance of recognizing care economies as structural forces, not private matters.

Across profiles, it is women—especially those embedded in extended family systems—who bear the greatest cost of staying. Whether by necessity or by choice, their immobility sustains households, but often at the expense of autonomy, income, and recognition. Any effort to support immobile populations must begin with acknowledging the gendered burdens—and power—of care.

7.3.4. Trauma and Failed Migration Narrow the Horizon

For many individuals, particularly returnees and deportees, the experience of migration itself becomes a barrier to future mobility. In these cases, immobility is not shaped by current desire or constraint alone—it is shaped by what has already been lived and lost. Across Colombia, Ethiopia, and Mexico, respondents spoke of fear, disappointment, debt, and disillusionment as reasons for staying. Even when aspiration persisted, it was often dulled by the memory of failure, the fear of repetition, or the erosion of trust in migration systems.

In Mexico, migrants stranded in Mexico City often described previous attempts to reach the United States as defining—and scarring—experiences. Some had been detained, extorted, or deported. Others had simply been stuck for too long, slowly losing confidence that mobility would improve their lives. These individuals frequently align with the Trauma-Driven Stayee profile: not lacking aspiration altogether, but struggling to see migration as a viable or safe path.

In Colombia, some returnees from Venezuela and internally displaced persons described similar recalibrations. They had moved once—under pressure, with hope—and returned with nothing. For them, staying was a shield: a way to protect themselves, their children, and their dignity from systems they no longer trusted. In Ethiopia, returnees who had experienced failure abroad or displacement due to conflict often showed similar patterns. Their narratives were not about ambition, but about exhaustion.

Trauma operates on multiple levels. It alters confidence, reshapes risk perception, and narrows imagined futures. It may also silence aspiration—not out of apathy, but out of protection.

Trauma operates on multiple levels. It alters confidence, reshapes risk perception, and narrows imagined futures. It may also silence aspiration—not out of apathy, but out of protection. Even among Frustrated Aspirants, where the desire to migrate remains strong, those with past migration trauma carry a different hesitation: one shaped not by current barriers, but by painful experience.

This insight reinforces the importance of designing programs that recognize immobility not only as a socioeconomic status, but as a psychological and emotional condition. Support for immobile populations must address the legacies of movement, not just its absence.

7.3.5. Institutional Absence and Structural Constraint

Across all five countries, one of the most consistent drivers of involuntary immobility is the weakness, absence, or selectivity of institutions. Whether through lack of documentation, poor service access, or uneven enforcement of rights, state systems often fail to create the conditions for either safe movement or dignified staying. This failure is especially consequential for populations already at the margins—those displaced, undocumented, or burdened by care responsibilities.

In Mexico, migrants stuck in legal limbo—particularly in Mexico City—are immobilized not by geography, but by bureaucracy. Many respondents lacked identification papers, residency permits, or information about regularization options. Their inability to move forward or return was rooted in institutional opacity and fear of enforcement. Similarly, in Ecuador, displaced Colombians and Venezuelans described being unable to access housing assistance, health services, or financial support due to unclear legal status. The absence of documentation compounded both economic vulnerability and social exclusion.

In Mali and Colombia, immobility was shaped less by formal legal barriers and more by the erosion of basic service infrastructure. In conflict-affected or rural areas, people described being “abandoned” by the state—left without protection, employment, or functioning schools. In these contexts, people stayed not because they were rooted, but because they had nowhere else to go—and no support to leave. In Ethiopia, especially in Afar, people struggled to access land, reestablish livelihoods, or navigate reintegration programs after displacement. State presence was often minimal or fragmented.

Institutional failure reinforces Frustrated Aspirants and Acquiescent Stayees, locking people into positions of low mobility not because they lack aspiration, but because systems do not recognize, document, or serve them. This insight also helps explain how Strategic Aspirants become stuck: even when people defer migration intentionally, they may find that supportive systems don't exist when they are ready to act.

Ultimately, immobility thrives in places where choice is constrained not just by personal circumstances, but by the absence of formal mechanisms that make movement safe and staying viable. Institutions shape the boundaries of mobility—by what they offer, what they withhold, and whom they recognize.

7.3.6. Staying Has Meaning—Even When Marginalized

Across all five countries, one of the most striking insights is that staying often carries deep meaning—even when it emerges from constraint, trauma, or loss. People stay not only because they must, but because they are invested: in land, in family, in community, or in rebuilding a sense of belonging. Yet these investments are frequently invisible to policy systems and overlooked in migration discourse, which continues to equate agency with movement.

In Mali, older respondents spoke of staying not as resignation, but as rootedness. Even amid climate pressure and displacement, they framed remaining as a form of dignity: staying to care for grandchildren, to protect ancestral land, or to uphold spiritual commitments. In Ethiopia, women who stayed behind during conflict or after displacement described their role as stabilizers—not passive figures, but actors who sustained households in the face of loss. These stories resonate with the Voluntary Stayee and Acquiescent Stayee profiles, not as signs of stagnation, but as adaptations to changing conditions.

In Colombia and Ecuador, staying was often framed in moral terms: as an act of responsibility, love, or sacrifice. Some returnees described staying as a decision to focus on the family that remained, rather than chase uncertain opportunities elsewhere. Others saw it as a way to invest in rebuilding after years of displacement or insecurity. Even in Mexico, where immobility was often experienced as exclusion, respondents expressed agency: they found ways to organize, to plan, and to resist invisibility—despite being caught in legal limbo.

What these stories reveal is that immobility is not inherently disempowering. It can be strategic. It can be restorative. And it can be chosen—at least in part—even when options are few. But its meaning is frequently obscured because it does not conform to dominant narratives of ambition, change, or migration as progress.

For policymakers and practitioners, the challenge is not just to recognize the constraints that shape immobility, but to acknowledge the value and intentionality that can exist within it. People are not simply stuck. They are often holding together fractured systems, shouldering care, and sustaining place under difficult conditions. To support them requires first seeing them—not as passive, but as protagonists in a different kind of mobility story.

7.4. From Pattern to Action

This chapter has offered a comparative synthesis of immobility across five countries, grounded in a shared typology and illuminated by six cross-cutting insights. The typology captures how people remain in place through distinct configurations of aspiration and capability, shaped by constraint, choice, trauma, and adaptation. It reminds us that staying is not one thing—it is many things, structured by life stage, gender, past experience, and institutional presence.

The cross-cutting insights explored in this chapter deepen that picture. They show that immobility is often negotiated, not decided; that aspirations shift across the life course; that care roles and gender expectations shape who stays and how; that trauma can close futures; and that institutional absence turns constraint into permanence. Most importantly, they show that immobility is not synonymous with failure. It is, in many cases, a quiet act of survival, strategy, or love.

As we turn to Chapter 8, the challenge becomes practical: how can programs and policies respond to the realities surfaced here? How can they support not just those who move, but also those who remain—those whose dignity lies not in motion, but in endurance, reinvention, or refusal? The next chapter takes up that challenge, translating this study's findings into concrete recommendations for more inclusive, care-aware, and grounded responses to human immobility.

8. Program and Policy Recommendations

We have seen that immobility is not merely the absence of migration—it is a lived condition shaped by care, constraint, aspiration, and risk.

8.1. From Insight to Action: Why This Matters

This report began with a question: why do people stay, even amid crisis and uncertainty? Over the course of five country studies and dozens of life stories, we have seen that immobility is not merely the absence of migration—it is a lived condition shaped by care, constraint, aspiration, and risk. People stay for others, for themselves, for fear, for love. But whether they stay by choice, by necessity, or by circumstance, the policy systems around them too often fail to respond.

This final chapter draws together the implications of that failure—and offers an alternative. Across both policy and program levels, we identify actionable strategies to support people not only on the move but also in place. The aim is not to prevent migration, but to expand dignity, choice, and capability for those who stay.

8.2 Programmatic Principles and Action Areas

The comparative analysis of immobility across Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Ethiopia, and Mali reveals a textured landscape of staying—rooted in care, shaped by household negotiation, constrained by structure, and often sustained in the absence of institutional support. This complexity calls for a programmatic shift: immobility must not be treated as a residual condition or failure of migration, but as a development and protection concern in its own right. The following programmatic principles are grounded in the study's typology of immobility and the cross-cutting insights surfaced in Chapter 7. They are especially relevant for NGOs, civil society partners, and community-based organizations working to design interventions that affirm the dignity, safety, and aspirations of immobile populations—whether they stay by choice or constraint.

8.2.1. Support the Capability to Stay—Not Just the Capacity to Move

In addition to enabling safe migration pathways, programs should expand their focus to include concrete strategies that support people who stay in contexts with high emigration rates. Across the study countries, there was clear demand for localized opportunities: inclusive service delivery, dignified livelihoods, psychosocial support, and community infrastructure that reinforce the possibility of remaining with security and purpose.

Programs should expand their focus to include concrete strategies that support people who stay in contexts with high emigration rates.

In Colombia, strategic stayers emphasized the value of micro-enterprise development and land access. In Ecuador, indigenous youth wanted to stay rooted in community but lacked viable opportunities. As shown throughout Chapter 7, structural constraint—not lack of ambition—is a primary driver of immobility. Supporting the capability to stay means investing in the economic, cultural, and relational assets that allow people to remain on their own terms.

> *NGO implementers should lead in co-designing these interventions with local communities. Governments and donors should allocate place-based development funds to support sustainable immobility.*

8.2.2. Design Gender-Responsive and Care-Aware Interventions

Care work—performed predominantly by women—is one of the most persistent structural drivers of immobility. In all five countries studied, many women remain in place not because they lack migratory aspirations, but because they carry primary responsibility for caring for children, the elderly, the sick, or for sustaining households disrupted by others' displacement. This form of immobility, while often seen as voluntary, is deeply shaped by gender norms that cast women as the default providers of daily care. Intervening in this space is complex, as it means addressing moral, emotional, and socially legitimized expectations.

Designing gender- and care-sensitive policies must begin by rejecting the romanticization of care. While many women express love, duty, or identity in their caregiving roles, this should not be mistaken for free choice when meaningful alternatives are lacking. Programs must avoid reinforcing narratives that celebrate female sacrifice as virtue, and instead work to expand women's real agency. Staying should not be the only path compatible with care. Women must have the power to choose whether to stay, migrate, or reshape their roles on their own terms.

A critical pathway to greater choice is the full socio-economic inclusion of women.

When women have access to decent work, social protections, and recognition of both paid and unpaid labor, their bargaining power in households and communities increases. This reduces the immobilizing burden of care and strengthens women's ability to participate in migration decisions. Labor inclusion is not only an economic priority—it is essential to dignity, autonomy, and equity in mobility outcomes.

Programs must therefore do more than support caregivers—they must change the conditions that make caregiving a constraint. This means expanding access to public services such as childcare, elder-care, and mental health support; promoting co-responsibility within households; and designing employment policies that acknowledge and accommodate unpaid domestic labor. Only then can staying be a choice—rather than an obligation shaped by gendered limitations.

Governments, donors, and NGOs must incorporate a gender and human rights approach into their programs, prioritizing actions that redistribute care work and empower women through access to resources, education, and participation in decision-making. Only then will the barriers forcing them to stay be dismantled

8.2.3. Invest in Youth Aspirations—Wherever They Are

Youth consistently appeared as the most aspiration-rich yet structurally constrained group across all five countries. Many were not immobile by choice, but by sequence—waiting for opportunities, permission, or conditions that never materialized.

As discussed in Chapter 7, aspiration evolves with age, and frustration builds when options remain out of reach. Programs should move beyond a mobility-preparation mindset to support aspiration in place. This includes life planning tools, creative arts, digital access, vocational mentorship, and civic engagement platforms. Where mobility remains a goal, youth can be supported to pursue safe and informed pathways. Where staying is necessary, their sense of purpose must be cultivated at home.

NGO programs should integrate aspiration-building into youth platforms. Governments can support through infrastructure, and donors should ensure that youth staying is treated with equal priority to youth moving.

8.2.4. Bridge the Gap Between Return and Reintegration

Returnees—whether from international migration or internal displacement—frequently described a sense of being "dropped" into systems that were unprepared to receive them. Many had no access to legal recourse, housing, services, or psychosocial care. Without this support, return often becomes a path into stagnation, not recovery.

As seen in the comparative findings, trauma and migration failure often narrow people's horizons and mute future aspiration. Programs must treat return not as the end

of a journey, but a reentry point requiring tailored support: legal documentation, training, job matching, family reunification, and mental health care. This includes informal "boomerang" returnees—especially in Mexico and Colombia—who quietly resettle without formal residence change.

NGOs and humanitarian actors can deliver case management and psychosocial reintegration. States must align these efforts with local development and inclusion policies.

8.2.5. Strengthen Local Safety and Trust Ecosystems

People do not only stay because they feel secure. They often stay because they fear moving into worse insecurity, retaliation, or bureaucratic loss. Institutional distrust—especially among returnees, undocumented people, and caregivers—was a recurring theme in the study.

Programs must invest in community-based protecting environments and safety infrastructure: neighborhood early-warning systems, mobile service units, safe spaces for women, children and youth, and local protection mechanisms to prevent, report and activate protection measures against any type of violence. As shown across multiple cases in Chapter 7, trust must be rebuilt through relational intermediaries—faith leaders, women's groups, and local networks—who carry more legitimacy than state actors in many contexts. Such intermediaries are also strategically positioned to reestablish linkages with public institutions with rights protection mandates.

This work should be a joint effort by local public bodies, community-based organizations and local NGOs, supported by funding from national governments and multilateral agencies that recognize protection as a mobility enabler.

8.2.6. Plan with Households, Not Just Individuals

Mobility and immobility decisions are fundamentally relational. Yet many programs target individuals—providing cash, skills, or counseling—without recognizing how these interventions reverberate across households. Intra-household dynamics around care, gender, income, and timing often determine who stays and who moves.

Programs should shift to a household-centered lens: engaging families in migration planning, aspiration mapping, and conflict mitigation. As highlighted in Chapter 7, decisions about staying are rarely personal—they are negotiated through family responsibility, generational sequencing, and gender roles. Tools such as joint decision-making sessions1 and household mobility readiness assessments[2] can help programs support

1. Joint decision-making sessions consist of structured dialogues that facilitate collective deliberation among household members to negotiate mobility options, weighing risks, opportunities, and individual aspirations alongside shared household goals.

2. Household mobility readiness assessments are diagnostic tools that evaluate the capacities of households and and their members to pursue (or abstain from) migration, measuring factors like resource allocation, social networks, legal barriers, and adaptive strategies to climatic or economic stressors.

collective agency and prevent unintended harm.

NGOs and social service providers should implement household-based approaches. Governments and donors should build these principles into migration-related social protection and inclusion frameworks.

8.2.7. Reframe Narratives Around Staying

Public discourse often casts staying as failure—a symptom of laziness, fear, or lack of ambition. Yet across interviews, staying emerged as strategic, protective, moral, and proud. People stayed to care for others, to rebuild, to anchor their families.

Immobility is not just a personal experience. It is a policy blind spot—an outcome of systems that fail to create options, fail to acknowledge care, and fail to invest in those who remain.

Programs must invest in narrative change. Storytelling platforms, school curricula, and youth media can showcase staying as a choice worth valuing. As Chapter 7 showed, many who remain are not invisible—they are holding communities together under immense pressure. Local role models who represent "success without migration" can reshape aspiration landscapes for the next generation.

Civil society actors can lead in narrative and media strategy, with public sector support. International donors should recognize communication as a pillar of dignity-based development.

8.3 Policy Recommendations and Opportunities

Immobility is not just a personal experience. It is a policy blind spot—an outcome of systems that fail to create options, fail to acknowledge care, and fail to invest in those who remain. If migration policy and development planning are to become more inclusive, then immobility must be integrated—not as an afterthought, but as a recognized part of the mobility continuum.

This section outlines key policy directions for national governments, subnational authorities, and multilateral actors. While NGOs and civil society actors play a critical role in service delivery and local design, systemic change requires political commitment, institutional coordination, and durable frameworks. These recommendations aim to translate the insights of this study into action at scale—across policy domains including migration governance, social protection, territorial planning, and climate resilience.

8.3.1. Recognize Immobility as Part of the Mobility Continuum

Immobility is part of how people navigate risk, obligation, and possibility. Yet it remains under-theorized and undercounted in national migration strategies, regional frameworks, and international agendas.

Governments and multilateral actors must explicitly recognize immobile populations in migration, displacement, and development planning. This includes integrating immobility into national migration policies, displacement tracking tools, and humanitarian assessments. Regional frameworks such as the Los Angeles Declaration, IGAD Protocol, and AU Free Movement Protocols

should include provisions for protection, inclusion, and support for those who stay.

Government agencies and multilateral coordination bodies should lead this recognition. Data platforms and UN actors (e.g., IOM, UNHCR, UNDP) can support integration through technical guidance and monitoring tools.

8.3.2. Strengthen Policy Planning: Towards Climate-resilient Rootedness

Structural neglect and degraded services often leave people with no real option but to stay in precarious conditions. Investment should not only enable movement but also make staying viable—particularly in fragile and underserved regions.

Governments must prioritize localized development in high-immobility areas: investing in housing, public services, infrastructure, and livelihood systems. This should be built into territorial development plans and resilience strategies. Special attention is needed in climate-affected regions and post-conflict zones, where mobility constraints are deepest.

While integrating mobility into climate policy—such as Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and adaptation plans—has gained momentum, it is equally urgent to recognize immobility as a critical dimension. Staying is not passive; it reflects structural vulnerabilities that are often intensified by climate impacts. Colombia's National Adaptation Plan (2022)3 refers to "at-risk populations with limited capacity to migrate," and countries like Bangladesh and the Philippines already include immobile or "trapped" populations in their NDCs. More action is needed:

- Integrated diagnostics: Map areas of high immobility and climate risk, identifying key anchoring factors such as lack of access to information or migration networks.

- Differentiated policies: Implement measures like early warning systems for those unable to flee, and subsidies that address care burdens—the primary constraint on female mobility.

- Resilience through return: Design policies that support the return and reintegration of migrants, enabling them to contribute to local resilience using the human and financial capital gained through migration, and engaging diasporas in similar efforts.

National development ministries and regional planning bodies should lead. International financial institutions, global migration governance platforms, international entities coordinating climate resilience efforts, and donors must channel funding toward place-based investment that supports choice.

3. Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Colombia. Plan Nacional de Adaptación al Cambio Climático (PNACC) 2022-2026. https://www.minambiente.gov.co/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/PNACC-2016-linea-accion-prioritarias.pdf

8.3.3. Foster synergies between labor migration governance bodies and development agencies

Addressing the migration–development nexus requires a more holistic perspective—one that treats migration as a driver of development and considers both mobility and immobility. For migration policymakers, this means looking beyond immediate labor market needs to recognize that labor migration has both positive and negative impacts on origin communities. Development agencies, likewise, should recognize the potential of migration and diasporas to contribute to development goals. Foster institutional synergies between labor migration governance bodies and development cooperation agencies. When migration is viewed in relation to immobility, it can be integrated as a core element of development strategies—rather than seen as a failure of development or treated as a separate, peripheral issue.

In practice, collaboration on the migration–development nexus could include:

- Development programs for migrants and their families, particularly those engaged in labor or circular migration schemes. These programs could provide support throughout the entire migration cycle—from skills development at origin (technical and soft skills) to reintegration upon return (financial literacy, entrepreneurship support). This approach can help make immobility—such as that of strategic returnees or settled providers—a deliberate and fulfilling choice.
- Partnerships with private sector actors employing migrant workers in destination countries, to align on shared goals when designing migration programs and legal pathways. These partnerships could also promote shared responsibility for development outcomes in migrants' communities of origin.
- Engagement with civil society to ensure migration is rights-based for those who move, while also extending program access to those who stay in place but remain part of the migration equation.

Governments, development agencies, and the private sector must align efforts to leverage synergies between migration and development, ensuring legal pathways, rights protection, inclusion in host societies, and support for origin communities.

8.3.4. Make Care Central to Program Design and Social Protection

Care obligations shape mobility outcomes—but care is rarely integrated into policy planning. Those who remain to care are often excluded from eligibility criteria or protection frameworks.

Governments should embed care into the design of social protection programs, employment policies, and reintegration services. This includes subsidized caregiving, labor protections for informal carers, and recognition of caregiving as a social contribution. Migration policy should also recognize caregiving roles in household mobility dynamics.

Ministries of social development, labor, and gender equality should lead. UN Women, ILO, and UNICEF can provide standards, pilot models, and technical support.

8.3.5. Empower Youth in Place and in Motion

Youth are often the protagonists of aspiration—but too many are stuck between intent and possibility. Mobility systems must offer both: viable futures in place and safe pathways for movement.

Governments should fund youth engagement strategies that include local opportunity creation (e.g., entrepreneurship support, digital access, civic platforms), alongside access to mobility options (e.g., safe migration channels, vocational pathways abroad). These should be embedded in national youth plans and migration strategies

Youth ministries and education departments must collaborate with migration authorities. Donors and international NGOs can scale youth-focused interventions with a dual-staying/moving lens.

8.3.6. Support the Reintegration of Returnees—Formal and Informal

Returnees often fall between the cracks of policy systems. Whether they returned voluntarily, were deported, or simply "boomeranged," they often lack support to reestablish lives in dignity.

Governments should adopt holistic reintegration frameworks that combine documentation access, psychosocial care, housing security, employment assistance, and family reunification. These should apply to both international and internal returnees. Reintegration must be understood as a continuation of the mobility cycle—not its endpoint.

Migration ministries and local authorities should coordinate return and reintegration policy. Multilateral actors can support with technical tools and monitoring frameworks.

8.3.7. Expand Access to Legal Documentation and Civil Registration

Legal identity is foundational to both mobility and immobility. Across contexts, undocumented people were immobilized not just in practice, but in policy—unable to claim services, move freely, or make long-term plans.

Governments should expand legal identity through simplified procedures, mobile registration campaigns, and rights-based outreach. Birth registration, housing documentation, and civil registry integration must be prioritized in areas of high displacement or informality.

Interior ministries and civil registry authorities must lead this agenda. UNICEF, UNHCR, and regional development banks can support through resource and policy alignment.

8.3.8. Build Local Protection and Trust Ecosystems

Insecurity and institutional distrust immobilize people—not because they prefer to stay, but because the risks of moving are greater than the risks of staying. This insight requires a shift from abstract security policy to grounded protection systems.

Governments should invest in local protection mechanisms: community safety programs, mobile justice services, protection caseworkers, and access to legal remedy. Trust must be rebuilt through decentralized and relational institutions.

Municipal governments and justice ministries must take the lead. Donor coordination platforms and peacebuilding agencies can align funding and technical support.

8.3.9. Center Households in Mobility and Social Policy Planning

Mobility is negotiated within families—yet most policies target individuals. This disconnect leads to misaligned benefits and unintended harms, especially when household members move separately or decisions are postponed for care or generational reasons.

Governments should design family-sensitive migration and social protection policies: including household-level eligibility, shared planning tools, and family reunification as a central axis of reintegration and assistance. The household should be treated as a unit of support and agency.

Staying is often framed as failure in migration policy discourse. Yet, as this study has shown, many acts of staying are courageous, strategic, and dignified.

Social development and migration ministries should coordinate these efforts. NGOs can serve as field-testing partners for relational and household-targeted interventions.

8.3.10. Reframe Staying Narratives in National Policy and Public Messaging

Staying is often framed as failure in migration policy discourse. Yet, as this study has shown, many acts of staying are courageous, strategic, and dignified. Governments and multilateral actors must lead in reframing that narrative.

This includes public campaigns, curriculum reform, and leadership platforms that present staying as a valid—and often visionary—path. Changing how people see staying is essential to changing how policy supports it.

Public information ministries, migration authorities, and national planning bodies should collaborate on messaging strategies. Multilateral organizations can fund and amplify narrative-shifting work.

This study reframes how we understand human mobility by putting immobility at the center—not as a failure to move, but as a meaningful outcome in its own right. Across five countries, we found that people stay for many reasons: to care for others, to recover from trauma, to hold communities together, or because structural barriers leave them with no safe alternative. Staying is not the absence of movement—it is shaped by choices, constraints, and responsibilities that deserve attention.

By combining data and life stories, this study shows that staying can be many things – strategic or constrained, temporary or long-term. What matters is that it is recognized, supported, and understood. The recommendations in this report offer concrete ways for governments, donors, and non-profit organizations to do just that. Ultimately, this is about expanding freedom: the freedom to stay or to go—and to do so with dignity, whatever the choice may be.

Annex: Design and Methodology

A. Study Design and Comparative Framework

This study employed a sequential, mixed-methods design across five countries—Colombia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Mali, and Mexico—combining focus groups, household surveys, and in-depth interviews. The research was embedded in Ayuda en Acción's operational contexts and designed in partnership with the IDRC Research Chair on Migration and Forced Displacement, leveraging affiliated universities and field teams across Latin America and Africa.

The approach was exploratory and comparative, focused on understanding the layered experiences of immobility. It sought not only to measure aspirations or barriers to migration but to reveal how people interpret staying in the face of adversity, care obligations, violence, or systemic constraint. The core analytical lens used throughout the study was the aspirations-capabilities framework, complemented by attention to life-course dynamics, household roles, gender norms, and institutional trust. Each country team adapted the shared methodology to address local conflict, climate, displacement, or legal dynamics.

B. Site and Population Selection

Study sites were selected based on four main criteria:

1. *Strategic alignment with Ayuda en Acción programs and operational presence.*
2. *Diversity of immobility contexts (displacement, climate disruption, return, transit).*
3. *Feasibility, based on security, logistics, and local partnerships.*
4. *Research support, including presence of IDRC Chairs or affiliated institutions.*

Country Sites and Target Populations:

Country	*Study Site*	*Primary Immobile Group*	*Secondary Group(s)*
Colombia	*Cali and Cauca*	*Native residents*	*IDPs, Venezuelans*
Ecuador	*Ibarra and Otavalo*	*Ecuadorians*	*Displaced Venezuelans and Colombians, Returnees*
Ethiopia	*Afar (Ewa and Chifra)*	*Native residents*	*Returnees (internal and international), IDPs*
Mali	*Ségou (4 communes)*	*Local autochthonous households*	*Internally Displaced Persons*
Mexico	*Mexico City*	*Mexican nationals*	*Migrants in transit, returnees, asylum seekers*

In each country, focus groups, surveys, and interviews were implemented with both settled and displaced populations, enabling within-site comparisons of voluntary, involuntary, and acquiescent immobility.

C. Phased Data Collection

The research followed a three-phase sequence:

Phase	*Method*	*Purpose*
Phase 1	*Focus Groups*	*Validate constructs, refine tools, surface local logics of staying*
Phase 2	*Household Surveys*	*Map aspirations and capabilities across diverse groups*
Phase 3	*In-Depth Interviews*	*Deepen narrative insight into segment profiles and lived immobility*

Country teams conducted 1-4 focus groups per site. Survey samples ranged from ~350 to 430 individuals per country. Interview subsamples ranged from 22 to 40 participants, selected to reflect aspiration profiles, gender, age, and migration histories.

D. Survey Instrument and Latent Class Analysis (LCA)

The household survey captured migration aspirations across three dimensions:

- Time: past migration steps, present intentions, future preferences
- Level: individual and household
- Scenario: including hypothetical options such as documented migration

These allowed the team to identify nuanced immobility profiles, including:

- *People for whom migration is not desired or imagined*
- *People who aspire to migrate but lack means or support*
- *People who have migrated and returned, willingly or not*

LCA was conducted using a three-step model:

- *Segmentation: Cluster individuals based on six aspiration indicators.*
- *Assignment: Classify all respondents into latent clusters.*
- *Covariate modeling: Identify distinguishing characteristics by cluster (e.g., gender, age, displacement history, financial satisfaction)*

This produced statistically robust, cross-country comparable immobility segments, which were then explored through interviews.

E. Country-Specific Methodology Highlights

Mali - Ségou Region
Surveys were conducted in four communes (Pelengana, Sakoiba, Sebougou, and Ségou) among 373 respondents (188 autochthonous and 185 IDPs). Sampling was random, based on registries co-validated with local authorities. Thirty interviews were conducted to explore the emotional, strategic, and imposed dimensions of staying in the context of insecurity, land pressures, and state weakness.

Ethiopia - Afar Region (Ewa and Chifra)
A total of 364 surveys were conducted across four kebeles. Respondents included 154 non-displaced residents, 171 returnees from internal displacement, and 39 returnees from the Gulf. The study was co-led with Addis Ababa University with support from Semera University. Forty in-depth interviews captured climate-induced sedentarization, war displacement, and fractured mobility systems in Afar's fragile agropastoralist context.

Colombia - Cali and Cauca
The survey reached 427 respondents (250 in Cali, 177 in Cauca) using referrals through program beneficiaries and partner NGOs. Twenty-three interviews explored how aspirations are shaped by displacement, violence, caregiving, and community identity. Sampling included IDPs, Venezuelans, and returnees.

Ecuador - Ibarra and Otavalo
A total of 350 surveys were conducted, with 284 in Ibarra and 66 in Otavalo. The sample included Ecuadorians (220) and displaced Venezuelans and Colombians (130). Twenty-three interviews explored the effects of legal status, household strategy, and social exclusion on staying.

Mexico - Mexico City and metro area
The study reached 351 respondents: 175 Mexican nationals and 176 foreign-born migrants (mainly Venezuelan, Cuban, Central American). Focus groups and interviews (n=22) highlighted legal limbo, care roles, and risk exposure as drivers of constrained urban immobility.

F. Interview Sampling and Analysis

Participants for interviews were drawn from LCA clusters and selected to reflect variation in aspiration, migration experience, gender, and age. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted in local languages, and transcribed for analysis. Thematic coding was carried out by each country team, with synthesis workshops held to compare insights across sites.
Themes explored included:

- *Emotional logics of staying (pride, fear, duty, exhaustion)*
- *Role of gender and household dynamics*
- *Perceived constraints or foreclosures of migration*
- *Institutional trust, service access, and local opportunity*

G. Ethical Considerations

All teams followed rigorous ethical standards, including:

- *Informed consent and data confidentiality*
- *Referral systems for participants in distress*
- *Safeguards in conflict zones (e.g., alternate consent procedures, NGO support)*
- *Approval from relevant ethical review boards and university partners*
- *Participants received modest compensation (e.g., food vouchers) for time and participation.*

H. Limitations and Data Availability

Sample sizes varied across sites due to budget, access, and logistical constraints

In Mali and Ethiopia, translation and local enumeration may have introduced inconsistencies

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, datasets are not publicly available, but anonymized summaries can be shared upon request with permission from Ayuda en Acción or IDRC

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