



Short report

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

A comparative Study in Latin America and Africa



A report by  
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# 1. Introduction: Rethinking Immobility

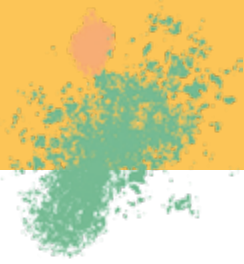
Across the globe, migration continues to dominate public policy, media narratives, and development programming. Yet despite this sustained focus on mobility, most people—indeed, the overwhelming majority—do not move. Even in contexts of profound disruption, whether through conflict, climate shocks, or economic instability, people overwhelmingly stay. They remain in rural areas despite drought. They endure in urban peripheries marked by violence.

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,

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?

and deep skepticism toward migration systems that have failed before.

This study examines immobility not as a leftover category but as a rich social phenomenon, deeply entangled with aspiration, constraint, identity, and risk.



Staying deserves the same level of analytical 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.



Our goal is to equip policymakers, donors, and practitioners with a deeper understanding of how people make sense of 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, development organizations, and climate adaptation and migration governance agendas.

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 quiet work of sustaining peace in fragile communities.

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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.

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2.

# Research Objectives and Rationale





## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

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, or how immobility reflects not indifference, but adaptation,

1. IOM World Migration Report 2024 <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/msite/wmr-2024-interactive/>

## The vast majority of people do not migrate. Only 3.6 percent of the world’s population are international migrants.

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.

## 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 desirable. 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.

### 2.3. Why This Matters for Development and Humanitarian Actors

Across the five countries, people navigate intersecting pressures: poverty, 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. 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.



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





## Staying is too often equated with inertia, as if those who remain are merely stuck, left behind, or resigned to their fate.

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 (im)mobility 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 those 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.

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



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

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.

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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.

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.

4.

# Study Design, Methodological Approach, and Case Selection



This study was designed 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.

## 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.)

### 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.

These insights directly shaped the design of our survey instruments to reflect lived experience, not just academic categories.

### 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.

### 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,

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who is holding on to dreams, and who is quietly adapting.

### 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.



# 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

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.

## 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.

## 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.

- 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

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.

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 context 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, especially among 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.

# 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.

## 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.

Three segments of immobility emerged from the study. Segment 1 is the Involuntarily Immobile - a group that includes both displaced and autochthonous households

with the lowest assets and the greatest caregiving burdens. Their immobility is driven by poverty, trauma, and the pressures of daily survival. Displaced respondents emphasize the desire to return home, while autochthonous households speak of long-term hardship and the need for local investment. Segment 2 is the Aspirational but Structurally Blocked. This group is composed of younger, more educated individuals who imagine migration but remain stuck. Their aspirations are deferred by household hierarchy, gendered norms, and financial constraints—leaving them caught between individual desire and family responsibility. Segment 3 are the Voluntary Anchors - older, primarily autochthonous residents who stay by choice. More secure and often heads of household, they are rooted in land, legacy, and identity. For them, immobility reflects a role—preserving household continuity and community cohesion.

Displacement plays a central role in segments 1 and 2, but in different ways. In segment 1, it is a defining rupture—displaced respondents stay because they lack alternatives, and survival is their only option. In segment 2, displacement adds emotional and structural strain to an already constrained environment. Displaced individuals in this segment often express higher aspirations but remain stuck in temporary or unstable living arrangements, with limited trust in institutions and unclear futures. Their frustration is

compounded by the sense of being suspended—neither integrated into the host community nor able to return. In segment 3, by contrast, nearly all respondents are autochthonous. They stay by choice, often supporting mobile family members while anchoring the household. For them, immobility is a deliberate act of continuity and stewardship—not a response to rupture.

Across all three segments, immobility is structured through the household. Segment 1 households are organized around care and survival, often led by women or displaced men with limited resources. In segment 2, mobility decisions are postponed or denied within the family—by elders, spouses, or practical constraints. In segment 3, staying is an intentional, intergenerational strategy: the elder holds ground so others may leave. Immobility in Mali is not simply an outcome of constraint. It is also a product of relational decisions, community roles, and the burdens—and dignity—of holding together what remains.

## 5.2. Ethiopia

In Ethiopia's Afar Region, immobility reflects the combined effects of displacement, disrupted pastoral livelihoods, and gendered social norms. In Chifera 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

**Immobility is structured through the household. Segment 1 households are organized around care and survival, often led by women or displaced men with limited resources.**

the three clusters 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.

Three segments of immobility emerged from the study. Segment 1 includes the Acquiescent and Instrumental Stayees—the largest and most structurally excluded group. These are largely elder caregivers, widows, and agropastoralists with the lowest education, income, and access to services. Their immobility is grounded in care responsibilities and livelihood loss. Migration is not imagined, discussed, or supported. Segment 2, the Isolated Aspirants in Immobile Households, includes younger individuals who want to migrate but are blocked by household dynamics. They live in larger families where others do not share their outlook or support their

plans. Many are women or dependent adults who lack the power or resources to act alone. Segment 3 consists of Frustrated Returnees. These are mostly former international migrants who returned after deportation, trauma, or economic failure. They are more educated and experienced, but emotionally exhausted and economically stalled. Their current immobility reflects the high cost of failed migration and an uncertain path forward.

Displacement and return cut across the segments but take different forms. In segment 1, returnees from internal displacement join local caregivers in holding together fractured households. Their concern is survival, not aspiration. In segment 2, many respondents—especially in Chifera—report a desire to leave, but face skepticism from relatives shaped by past migration failure or religious and gendered norms. For them, displacement has fragmented households and complicated decision-making. In segment 3, most are returnees from the Gulf, now living in Ewa. Their stories speak of imprisonment, exploitation, and remigration plans that collapsed under conflict and economic crisis. Though open to migrating again, they often lack trust, documents, or the strength to begin anew. Their staying is not a declaration of contentment—it is a state of pause and recovery.

As in Mali, the household is the site where staying is decided, justified, or imposed. In segment 1, immobility is organized around caregiving: women stay to raise children or support aging parents; men stay to protect land or manage minimal income.

In segment 2, aspiration collides with resistance: young people express the desire to migrate, but no one else in the household is planning to go. Migration is imagined alone but lived relationally. In segment 3, many migrated for the household—sending remittances, paying off loans, or supporting relatives. Their return often marks a failed strategy and a need to renegotiate family roles. In all cases, immobility reflects roles and relationships.

### 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 clusters 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.

Segment 1 includes Care-Entrenched Stayers, Settled Returnees, and Satisfied Strategists. These individuals have low migration aspirations and find meaning in remaining. For Care-Entrenched Stayers—



often older women in Cauca—immobility reflects caregiving duty and emotional anchoring within the household. Settled Returnees are primarily urban, often men, who have migrated before but now choose to stay, framing migration as misaligned with their current life course. Satisfied Strategists—stable household heads with small businesses—see staying as a form of pragmatic optimism. For all three, immobility is not resignation

but a conscious decision shaped by responsibility, recalibration, and rootedness in local opportunity.

Segment 2 comprises Strategic Aspirants, Constrained Aspirants, and Trauma-Driven Stayees. Strategic Aspirants are preparing to migrate legally and cautiously, often tracking opportunities while awaiting the right time. Constrained Aspirants—especially women—desire to migrate but are

## In Ecuador, immobility is driven by intersecting pressures—care, violence, discrimination, and climate stress—within both Ecuadorian and displaced Colombian and Venezuelan households.

blocked by caregiving roles or household resistance. Trauma-Driven Stayees, in contrast, are immobilized by past violence, displacement, or systemic neglect. Their immobility is urgent but obstructed, shaped by a lack of resources, documentation, or institutional trust. Across this segment, aspiration is present—but the means to act on it are fragmented or absent.

What unites both segments is that immobility in Colombia is deeply relational and structurally patterned. Segment 1 households often revolve around stability and caregiving; segment 2 households experience tension between individual aspiration and shared constraint. Age, gender, violence exposure, and institutional failure shape who can act on their desires and who remains still. Staying is not a static condition—it is an outcome negotiated within families, filtered through hardship, and redefined across life stages. In this context, immobility must be recognized not as passivity, but as a dynamic condition that mirrors the uneven geography of opportunity and resilience in Colombia.

### 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.

Two broad segments of immobility emerged from in Ecuador. Segment 1 includes Strategic Migrant Planners, Aspirational Planners with Constraints, and Frustrated Aspirants. These individuals—often younger and better educated—express high

## Women stay more often as caregivers; men are more likely to describe staying as recovery or cultural anchoring.

aspirations to migrate but face barriers such as legal precarity, caregiving burdens, and lack of income. Some delay migration deliberately, gathering documents and planning routes, while others have been worn down by repeated obstacles or dashed hopes. Among displaced populations, aspiration often persists but is undercut by trauma, exclusion from formal systems, and the high emotional cost of failed movement. Their staying is rarely final—it is aspirational, suspended, or quietly abandoned.

Segment 2 includes Care-Rooted Stayers, Post-Mobility Stayers, and Embedded Cultural Stayers. These individuals stay with intention—framed by responsibility, recovery, or identity. For some, caregiving duties or moral ties to children and elders outweigh any potential benefit of moving. For others, especially those who have previously migrated, staying reflects resolution: a choice to rebuild stability in place. Embedded Cultural Stayers, mostly Ecuadorians, never considered migration at all; their narratives are rooted in tradition, local belonging, and emotional continuity. Unlike those in segment 1, who often wait

for a change in circumstances, respondents in segment 2 describe staying as settled and relationally meaningful.

Nationality shapes the logic of staying. Among displaced Venezuelans and Colombians, immobility often follows disrupted migration: a coping response to blocked routes, administrative exhaustion, or family fragmentation. Among Ecuadorians, especially those in Otavalo, immobility reflects cultural grounding and intergenerational duty. Across both populations, however, immobility is deeply gendered. Women stay more often as caregivers; men are more likely to describe staying as recovery or cultural anchoring. In both cases, immobility is structured less by absolute constraint than by a mix of household obligation, emotional calculus, and limited opportunity. It reflects not simply an inability to go, but a complex—and often fraught—logic of staying.

### 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

## For some, like foreign-born individuals “Rooted by Aspiration,” immobility is framed as fulfillment—a purposeful decision to stay after migration goals were partially achieved.

frameworks often fail to register these immobilized populations, rendering their needs invisible in both humanitarian and development programming.

Two distinct segments emerged from the study. Segment 1 of Resolved and Relational Stayers includes Strategic Returnees, Settled Providers, and Care-Entrenched and Anchored Women. These individuals, both Mexican and foreign-born, remain with clarity and intention. Some have returned from the U.S. and re-established family life or informal businesses. Others, particularly women, stay to sustain caregiving roles that hold households together. For some, like foreign-born individuals “Rooted by Aspiration,” immobility is framed as fulfillment—a purposeful decision to stay after migration goals were partially achieved. What unites this segment is the absence of active aspiration to leave and a shared orientation around household stability, moral commitment, or resolved purpose.

Segment 2 of Aspirational but Structurally Blocked includes Blocked Youth and Caregivers, Ideological or Cultural Cosmopolitans, and Exhausted and Acquiescent Stayers. These individuals express migration aspirations but remain immobilized by legal insecurity, poverty,

discrimination, or emotional exhaustion. Youth in this group often feel stalled, held back by age, family obligations, or precarious legal status. Some retain cosmopolitan aspirations, engaging with migration as an idea or ideal, but lack a pathway to act. Others have internalized exclusion after repeated failures or dangerous experiences in transit, choosing to remain despite continuing desire to leave. For this segment, staying is often provisional, contingent, or reluctantly accepted—a condition shaped by policy, pressure, and fatigue.

Across both segments, the Mexican case highlights how urban immobility is rarely static. It is actively negotiated in shelters, households, informal markets, and bureaucratic offices. While some stay out of care or purpose, others remain in suspension—waiting for documents, decisions, or a way out. Legal precarity, gendered expectations, and return trajectories structure these decisions. For many, immobility reflects neither rootedness nor success, but the narrowing of mobility horizons in a city seen as a crossroads. Recognizing immobility in Mexico City requires shifting the frame: from movement as strategy to staying as struggle, resolution, or survival.

# 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 sections.

## 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.”

This pattern of negotiation plays out along household lines. In Mali and Ethiopia, younger men describe staying as a result of familial sequencing, waiting their turn while contributing to agricultural or domestic labor. In Colombia and Ecuador, women often describe staying as a collective decision to prioritize children’s schooling, elderly care, or household stability, even when it delays or derails their own plans. The

People describe staying as the outcome of negotiation—with others in the household, with systems, and with themselves.

outcome is a choreography of mobility and immobility across generations and genders, with immobility shaped as much by others’ movements as one’s own intent.

In Mexico, the negotiation extends beyond the household to institutional and legal systems. Migrants in limbo wait for paperwork, permissions, or safe routes—circumstances shaped more by state delay than by personal choice. Here, staying is shaped less by relational duty and more by forced suspension, yet it remains provisional, held in a state of negotiation that never resolves.

## 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

## This shift—from aspiration to rootedness—suggests that age and household role mediate both capacity and meaning

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 Ethiopia and Mali, young men who aspire to migrate often remain constrained by economic instability, family hierarchy, or insecure routes, embodying the “generation-in-waiting” dynamic. In contrast, older adults—particularly returnees in Colombia—describe staying as a way to rebuild after loss, reinvest in land, or stabilize the household. These generational shifts reflect changing relationships to both opportunity and obligation, and a redefinition of success not as departure, but as endurance.

In Ecuador and Mexico, similar patterns emerge. Younger respondents describe migration as a goal, a right of passage, or a necessity—especially when household income is low. Yet their ability to act is shaped by the needs of others: aging relatives, children, or partners. Older adults, especially those who have returned or who never left, often describe staying as a closing of the circle—

settling into care roles or community leadership. Age reframes aspiration, not by eliminating it, but by converting it into other forms of social contribution.

### 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: 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.

## 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, repetition, 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.

In Mexico, migrants stranded after deportation or failed U.S. entry attempts describe a deep sense of disillusionment. Some fear reattempting due to violence, corruption, or further loss. Others remain because the costs—emotional and financial—have become too high. Similarly, in Ethiopia, returnees who experienced hostility or instability abroad often describe staying not as a choice, but as self-protection. These are not people who never aspired, but people whose hope has been blunted by harm.

In Colombia, trauma takes the form of lost investments, severed networks, and institutional neglect. For these individuals, staying is a kind of reset—but one tinged with fear and loss. They remain in places where they feel marginally safer, but not necessarily more secure. This trauma reshapes what migration means—it becomes not a promise of improvement, but a reminder of fragility.

## 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.

In Ecuador and Mexico, displacement intersects with legal uncertainty. Migrants without documentation are trapped between jurisdictions—unable to regularize their status, rent housing, or access aid. In Colombia and Mali, rural communities report long-term neglect: schools deteriorate, clinics close, and agricultural support disappears. These absences not only prevent onward movement. They can make staying deeply precarious, even dangerous.



In Ethiopia, the state's role in reintegration is inconsistent. Displaced families returning to conflict-affected areas often find their land occupied, their homes destroyed, and services fragmented. Without legal redress or material support, these returnees are immobilized by neglect, not by choice. Across all contexts, the state's absence—or selective presence—transforms immobility from a strategy into a trap.

## 6.6. Immobility Is Meaningful, Even When Marginalized

The final insight is perhaps the most important: 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.

In Mali, older adults speak of staying to preserve lineage, land, and community values, even amid climate crisis. In Ethiopia, women who remained after displacement describe themselves as stabilizers—holding together households through war, loss, and disruption. Their staying is not apathy—it is labor. In Colombia and Ecuador, staying is often a conscious act of rebuilding, a way to reclaim home after migration or violence.

In Mexico, immobility can be a refusal—to move into danger, to accept invisibility, or to yield to bureaucratic erasure. People stranded in transit zones form mutual aid groups, organize politically, and cultivate resilience in place. Across all five countries, immobility often reflects a deep and quiet form of agency. Recognizing this meaning is not just about narrative justice—it is essential to designing interventions that affirm the people who remain.

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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. Some remain due to blocked opportunity or persistent caregiving roles. Others stay after migration attempts fail, or because insecurity, institutional neglect, or family strategy render movement untenable. And

## Others stay with intention—rooted in land, community, or the choice to stabilize what others have left behind.

still others stay with intention—rooted in land, community, or the choice to stabilize what others have left behind.

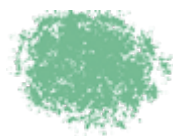
What emerges is not a binary of mobility versus immobility, but a landscape of relational, strategic, and constrained staying—each shaped by structural conditions and deeply human calculations. Immobility, in this light, is not the opposite of migration. It is a social outcome that demands its own forms of recognition, support, and investment.

The next section of this report turns from diagnosis to response. Drawing on the typologies and cross-cutting themes presented above, we outline a set of programmatic and policy recommendations to better support those who remain. These proposals are not designed to discourage migration. Rather, they aim to ensure that staying—when it happens—is safe, viable, and valued. Grounded in local realities and framed through care, capability, and choice, these recommendations offer a path forward for governments, donors, and civil society actors working to create inclusive and dignity-affirming systems.

7.

# Program and Policy Recommendations





## 7.1. 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 section 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.

## 7.2 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

## Immobility is not merely the absence of migration—it is a lived condition shaped by care, constraint, aspiration, and risk.

concern in its own right. The following programmatic principles are grounded in the study's typology of immobility and the crosscutting insights surfaced in section 6. 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.

### 7.2.1. Support the Capability to Stay—Not Just the Capacity to Move

Programs should expand their focus beyond enabling migration to include concrete strategies that support people who stay. 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.

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 section 6, 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.*

### 7.2.2. 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, eldercare, 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.

### 7.2.3. 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 section 6, 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.*



#### 7.2.4. 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 re-entry point requiring tailored support: legal documentation, 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.*

### 7.2.5. 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 safety infrastructure: neighbourhood watch systems, mobile service units, safe spaces for women and youth, and local protection mechanisms. As shown across multiple cases in section 6, 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.

*Community-based organizations and local NGOs should lead this work, supported by funding from national governments and multilateral agencies that recognize protection as a mobility enabler.*

### 7.2.6. Plan with Households, Not Just Individuals

Mobility and immobility decisions are fundamentally relational. Yet many programs target individuals—providing cash,

skills, or counselling—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 section 6, decisions about staying are rarely personal—they are negotiated through family responsibility, generational sequencing, and gender roles. Tools such as joint decision-making sessions and household mobility readiness assessments can help programs support 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.*

### 7.2.7. 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.

Programs must invest in narrative change. Storytelling platforms, school curricula, and youth media can showcase staying as a choice worth valuing. As section 6 showed, many who remain are not invisible—they

# Local role models who represent “success without migration” can reshape aspiration landscapes for the next generation.

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.*

## 7.3 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.

### 7.3.1. 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, and UNDP) can support integration through technical guidance and monitoring tools.*

### 7.3.2. 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) <sup>1</sup>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,*

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1. Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development (Colombia). (2022). \*National Climate Change Adaptation Plan (PNACC) 2022-2026

*global migration governance platforms, international entities coordinating climate resilience efforts, and donors must channel funding toward place-based investment that supports choice.*

### 7.3.3. Foster institutional synergies between labor migration governance bodies and development cooperation agencies

Foster institutional synergies between labor migration governance bodies and development cooperation 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. 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

## 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.

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.

### 7.3.4. 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.*

### 7.3.5. 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.*

### 7.3.6. 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.*

### 7.3.7. 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.*

### 7.3.8. 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.*

### 7.3.9. 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.

*Social development and migration ministries should coordinate these efforts. NGOs can serve as field-testing partners for relational and household-targeted interventions.*

### 7.3.10. 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.*

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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 operational contexts and designed in partnership with the Peru IDRC Research Chair on Migration and Forced Displacement at Universidad del Pacifico, leveraging affiliated universities and field teams across Latin America and Africa.

The approach was exploratory and comparative, focusing 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.

## B. Site and Population Selection

Country sites were selected based on four criteria:

1. Strategic alignment with Ayuda en Acción country programs and operational presence;
2. Diversity of immobility contexts, including displacement, climate disruption, return, and transit;
3. Feasibility, based on security, logistical, and institutional factors;
4. Research support, including the presence of IDRC Chairs or affiliates.

### Study Sites and Target Populations

| Country  | Study Site             | Main Immobile Group | Comparison Immobile Group   |
|----------|------------------------|---------------------|---|
| Colombia | Cali                   | Native residents    | IDPs  |
| Ecuador  | Imbabura, Otavalo      | Native residents    | Displaced Colombians and Venezuelans                                    |
| Ethiopia | Afar (Ewa and Chifera) | Native residents    | IDP Returnees   |
| Mali     | Ségou                  | Native residents    | IDPs  |
| Mexico   | Mexico City            | Native residents    | Transit and asylum seekers from Caribbean and Central and South America |

Where possible, comparison groups were sampled in addition to the core native immobile population. These included displaced persons, returnees, and international migrants experiencing forms of forced immobility in the destination.

### C. Phased Data Collection

The research followed a three-phase sequence across all countries:

| <b>Phase</b> | <b>Method</b>       | <b>Purpose</b>  |
|--------------|---------------------|---|
| Phase 1      | Focus Groups        | Validate key constructs, refine survey language, and capture local narratives of immobility |
| Phase 2      | Household Surveys   | Map patterns of aspiration and capability across diverse immobile groups                    |
| Phase 3      | In-Depth Interviews | Deepen understanding of segments identified through LCA; explore meanings of staying        |

The sample sizes in the countries are summarized below:

| <b>Country</b> | <b>Focus Groups</b> | <b>Household Surveys</b> | <b>In-Depth Interviews</b> |
|----------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Colombia       | 2                   | 427                      | 27                         |
| Ecuador        | 4                   | 350                      | 23                         |
| Ethiopia       | 2                   | 364                      | 40                         |
| Mexico         | 2                   | 350                      | 22                         |
| Mali           | 2                   | 373                      | 30                         |

### D. Survey Instrument and Latent Class Analysis (LCA)

The survey was designed to capture migration aspirations across three time periods (past, present, future), relational levels (individual vs. household), and migration scenarios (including a hypothetical documented migration option). This enabled a multidimensional view of (im)mobility.

These configurations emerge from a layered set of survey items that capture how people think about migration across different time frames, relational levels, and degrees of action. Some questions ask what respondents would prefer in hypothetical scenarios (e.g., "if given papers"), others capture whether they have thought about or taken steps toward migrating. This allows for the creation of segments to distinguish between those for whom migration is not considered, those for whom it is imagined but unsupported, and those for whom it was once enacted but now foreclosed.

The latent class analysis (LCA) used in this study followed a three-step approach:

1. First step: Segment individuals into aspiration-based profiles using six core indicators.
2. Second step: Assign all respondents to latent clusters.
3. Third step: Model covariates (e.g., gender, age, displacement history, financial satisfaction) that distinguish each cluster.

The combination of these methods yielded statistically robust, cross-country comparable segments of immobile populations, which were then deepened and humanized through narrative interviews.

### E. Interview Sampling and Analysis

In each country, 22-40 respondents were selected from distinct LCA segments for in-depth interviews. This purposeful sampling enabled qualitative exploration of:

- Emotional logics of staying (e.g., pride, fear, care, exhaustion);
- Role of gendered norms and household structure;
- Aspirations foreclosed, suppressed, or deferred;
- Local institutional experiences and trust or disillusionment.

Interviews were semi-structured, digitally recorded (with consent), and transcribed or translated as appropriate. Analysis was conducted using inductive thematic coding, with synthesis workshops convened between researchers in each country and the lead team.

### F. Ethical Considerations and Fieldwork Protocol

All field teams were trained in ethical protocols, including informed consent, confidentiality, and referral mechanisms for participants facing risk or distress. Additional safeguards were in place in conflict-affected zones, including alternate consent strategies and support from local NGOs.

### G. Limitations and Data Availability

- Data collection was shaped by budget constraints and local security, leading to variation in survey size across countries.
- In Ethiopia and Mali, data collection relied heavily on local partners and may have faced translation inconsistencies or sampling irregularities.
- Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the dataset is not publicly available, but anonymized summaries can be shared upon request with Ayuda en Acción or IDRC approval.

