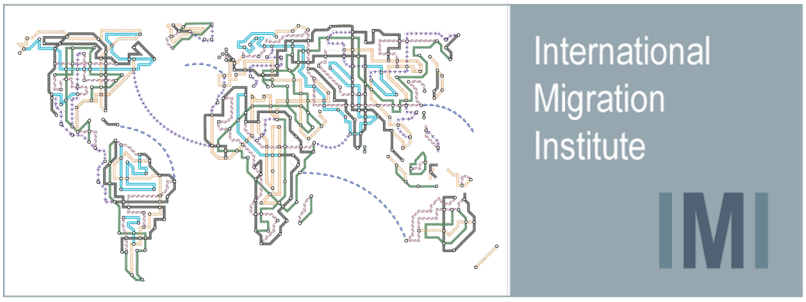

Working Papers

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The Capability to Stay:

New Directions for the Aspiration-Capability Framework in Migration Research

Kerilyn Schewel

PACES Project Working paper No.11

PACES
Making migration and migration policy decisions amidst societal transformations

Duke
JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN CENTER for INTERDISCIPLINARY and INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Abstract

Abstract: This paper introduces the capability to stay – the substantive freedom to achieve well-being in place – as a vital addition to the aspiration-capability framework in migration studies. Drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach and Hein de Haas' definition of human mobility, I argue that true mobility freedom encompasses both the capability to migrate and the capability to stay, and that these capabilities are not simply inverses of one another. The same development process – like rising educational attainment or market expansion – can expand migration capability while eroding staying capability, a dynamic obscured when analysis attends only to movement. Through contrasting cases from Morocco, Mexico, and Ethiopia, I demonstrate how integrating the capability to stay into the aspiration-capability framework provides conceptual tools to distinguish migration across the forced to voluntary spectrum, while remaining attentive to diverse immobility outcomes in the same setting. The paper develops a typology of capability configurations crossing migration and staying capabilities; introduces personal, social, and environmental conversion factors as approaches to studying the determinants of migration and staying capability; and considers strategies for empirical research on the capability to stay. By integrating the capability to stay, the aspiration-capability framework gains analytical purchase on displacement dynamics, development-induced dispossession, and diverse climate-related (im)mobilities–phenomena of growing significance that the current framework inadequately addresses.

Keywords: migration, development, environmental change, capability approach, immobility, capability to stay

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Contents

'The basic concern is with our capability to lead the kind of lives we have reason to value.'

– Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom (1999, 285)

Introduction

The concept of the 'capability to stay' asks a fundamental question: Do people have the substantive freedom to achieve the lives they value in the places where they currently reside? At first glance, this question appears relatively straightforward. Yet beneath its intuitive appeal lies a concept that is remarkably difficult to pin down, both theoretically and empirically – and one that has been largely absent from migration scholarship despite its analytical potential.

In an era of climate change, unprecedented economic inequality, protracted displacement, and political instability, migration research requires conceptual tools that can distinguish movement that reflects expanding freedom from movement reflecting the collapse of freedoms in place. The aspiration-capability framework, which has become increasingly influential in migration studies for disentangling the agentic (aspiration) and structural (capability) determinants of migration and immobility, offers a promising foundation (de Haas 2021). Yet its current formulation attends primarily to the capability to migrate, leaving its necessary counterpart – the capability to stay – under-theorized. Several recent studies applying this framework point to this lack (see Mallick & Schanze 2020; Salvo et al. 2023; Gotehus 2023; Tinoco 2023; Rodriguez-Pena 2023; Transiskus and Bazarbash 2024; Paudel 2025; Jolivet 2026). Without both capabilities in view, the framework cannot fully capture the spectrum from voluntary to forced migration, nor can it adequately explain *how* processes of social and environmental change shape (im)mobility outcomes.

I define the capability to stay as the substantive freedom to achieve well-being in place. This freedom depends not only on access to resources but also on whether personal, social, and environmental conditions enable those resources to be converted into well-being where one is. I argue that, unlike aspirations to stay or to migrate, the capability to stay and the capability to migrate are not simply inverses of one another. They require different configurations of resources and conversion factors, and (somewhat counterintuitively) the same development process can expand one capability while eroding the other. For example, the development transformations that enhance migration capability by increasing education, income, or connectivity may simultaneously erode staying capability by dismantling traditional livelihoods, degrading local environments, or reshaping visions of a good life in ways that devalue local livelihoods or ways of life (Van Praag 2021; Schewel 2025). This asymmetry has implications for how we theorize and research the relationship between migration, development, and environmental change.

Integrating the capability to stay into the aspiration-capability framework advances migration theory in several ways. It enables the framework to explain mobility outcomes across the full spectrum from voluntary to forced movements, addressing when migration reflects genuine choice and when it reflects capability deprivation. Building on the arguments of de Haas (2021), I argue that true mobility freedom encompasses both the capability to migrate and the capability to stay. It thus provides richer language

to connect the aspiration-capability framework to research on migration and immobility in the contexts of coercion, violence, and forced displacement (Arar & Fitzgerald 2022; Müller-Funk et al. 2023) and to a rapidly growing body of interdisciplinary research on environmental change and migration, which collectively interrogates how the erosion of the capability to stay due to climate change or environmental hazards impacts migration and immobility outcomes (see, for example, Mallick & Schanze 2020; McLeman 2018; Zickgraf 2021).

The capability to stay also contributes to the broader capability approach literature by introducing an explicitly spatial dimension to capability assessment. Capabilities are always realized *somewhere*, yet this spatial embeddedness is rarely foregrounded in capability scholarship. Further, the aspiration-capability framework foregrounds a connection already latent in Sen's original formulation: the link between what people value and what they are free to do. Sen introduced capability in relation to 'the lives we have reason to value' (1999, 285), but capability assessments more often measure 'functionings', or achieved outcomes, without attending to people's actual values and aspirations. The aspiration-capability framework makes this connection between values and freedoms more explicit – and the capability to stay intensifies the need to do so, because the capability to stay as I am defining it here cannot be inferred from the simple functioning of staying in place.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 reviews the origins and core concepts of the capability approach, focusing on elements most relevant for migration research and briefly reviewing how the capability approach has been operationalized across different contexts. Section 2 examines how capability is currently utilized in migration studies, reviewing the aspiration-capability framework and its contributions to understanding migration-development interactions. Section 3 introduces and theorizes the capability to stay, developing a revised typology that crosses migration and staying capabilities to reveal configurations of mobility freedom and unfreedom obscured by a singular focus on migration capability. It then examines how conversion factors shape the capability to stay, with a focus on the personal, social, and environmental conditions that support or undermine the capability to stay. Section 4 turns to questions of application, considering the concept's resonance with emerging normative discourse on the right to stay, strategies for operationalizing the capability to stay in empirical research, and the links between migration and staying capabilities. The conclusion reflects on the normative stakes of this framework for development policy and migration governance.

1 The Capability Approach

> *'The real wealth of a nation is its people. And the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy, and creative lives. This simple but powerful truth is too often forgotten in the pursuit of material and financial wealth.'*
>
> – Mahbub ul Haq (UNDP 1990, 9)

For much of the 20th century, the measurement of human progress and poverty was dominated by a singular paradigm: the utility-based metric of income and consumption. This approach, rooted in utilitarian philosophy, posited that human well-being could be adequately proxied by command over economic resources. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) became the primary scoreboard for national development, and the headcount ratio of those living below a monetary poverty line became the definitive metric of deprivation (Philipsen 2015).

By the late 20th century, this approach faced an epistemological crisis. The development economist and philosopher Amartya Sen – together with others like Mahbub ul Haq – reminded economists that income is merely an instrument, a means to an end, rather than an intrinsic measure of well-being (Sen 1985, 1999). Standard economic assessments thus too often confuse the means of living with the ends of living. This 'means-ends distinction' is central to the capability approach Sen ultimately developed as an alternative theory of development. Rather than asking what resources people command, the capability approach asks what people are actually able to do and be (Sen 1999; Robeyns 2017).

A core claim of the capability approach is that resources do not automatically translate into well-being. Sen argued, for example, that a person with a high income who is physically disabled and lacks access to social services may be 'poorer' in terms of their ability to lead a good life than a person with lower income but good health and social support. The same argument applies to rights: a person may possess the right to vote, but if they cannot reach a polling station or take time from work, that right remains abstract rather than realized. Resources and rights matter, Sen argued, but they matter instrumentally, as 'inputs' that must be converted into something else (see Sen 1999). The proper space for evaluating human welfare is the space of capabilities: the substantive freedoms people have to achieve the lives they value.

1.1 Core Concepts

The capability approach is a normative and open-ended framework that situates human freedom as both the primary end and the principal means of development. At the most general level, the capability approach asks: What are people really able to do and what kind of person are they able to be? (Robeyns 2017, 9). To answer that question, the capability approach relies on three core concepts: functionings, capabilities, and conversion factors (Fig. 1).

Functionings refer to the various states of 'being' and 'doing' that a person actually achieves in their life. These range from elementary functionings essential for survival and basic human dignity (e.g., being fed, being sheltered, being in good health) to complex functionings relating to social integration, psychological well-being, and political agency (e.g., achieving self-respect, taking part in the life of the community).

Capabilities refer to the potential to achieve these functionings – the states of being and doing that are accessible to people. Sometimes the term refers to a specific functioning (literacy, mobility, bodily health) and sometimes to the set of alternative functioning combinations that a person can achieve, capturing the substantive freedom of an individual to lead the kind of life they have reason to value (Sen 1999). This latter definition is often spoken of as a person's 'capability set.' The capability to stay as described here is best conceptualized as a complex capability made up of more discrete capabilities – the freedom to live well in place reflects an individual's (or a community's) capability set.

Conversion factors determine whether and how a person can transform a resource into a functioning. The capability approach rejects 'resourcism', or the idea that equalizing resources automatically leads to equality of well-being (Sen 1992). People have different abilities to convert resources into functionings. (A pregnant person, for example, may require more food to achieve the same functioning of 'being well-nourished.') The capability approach literature generally posits three types of conversion factors (Robeyns 2017): *personal conversion factors* internal to the person (e.g., physical condition, skills); *social conversion factors* stemming from the society in which one lives (e.g., public policies, social norms, power relations related to class, gender, race, or caste); and *environmental conversion*

factors, emerging from the physical or built environment (e.g., climate, pollution, infrastructure, geography).

A focus on conversion factors rebuts the common criticism that the capability approach is too individualistic (Robeyns 2017). Ingrid Robeyns argues that the primary unit of moral concern in the capability approach is the individual, but the approach is ontologically capable of recognizing the power of social and environmental structures on individual and group outcomes through the mechanism of conversion factors (Robeyns 2005). As I will argue, a focus on conversion factors is essential to the development of a research agenda that takes seriously the capability to stay and achieve well-being in place.

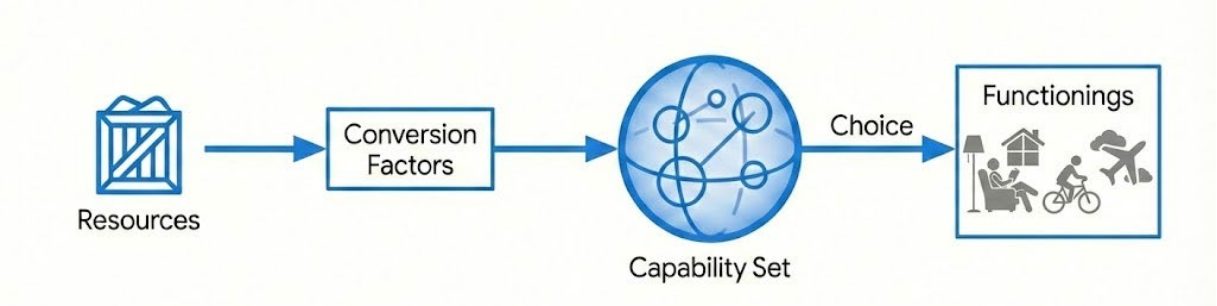

Figure 1. Key Concepts in the Capability Approach
Image generated using Google Gemini

1.2 *Operationalizing the Capability Approach*

The capability approach sparked a massive growth in research across a variety of disciplines. The sheer breadth of this literature is a testament to the power of Sen's original insight that well-being should be measured not by resources, but by the substantive freedom to achieve the lives we value. Yet, this insight also ignited significant debate, some sophisticated and some sloppy applications, and extensive philosophizing. In fact, some of the approach's preeminent scholars – including Martha Nussbaum, Ingrid Robeyns, and even Amartya Sen – are philosophers by trade, each with their own preferences on the definition, scope, and application of key concepts of the capability approach (see Nussbaum 2000; Robeyns 2017 for a review).[1]

A persistent source of confusion in the capability approach literature has been the varying levels of abstraction at which the approach is applied. Is it a theory of justice? A formula for poverty measurement? A guide for development policy? Robeyns (2005, 2017) resolves this by defining the capability approach as a deliberately open-ended and under-specified conceptual framework, which can be used for multiple purposes.[2] Treating the capability approach as a 'theory of everything' invites

[1] This extends beyond the key thinkers of the field, but also to its application. As Robeyns summarizes, in the rapid adoption of the CA across disciplines, 'moral philosophers, quantitative social scientists, and qualitative social scientists have each signed up to a different set of meta-theoretical assumptions and find different academic practices acceptable and unacceptable' (Robeyns 2017, 34–35).

[2] 'It is open-ended because the general capability approach can be developed in a range of different directions, with different purposes, and it is underspecified because additional specifications are needed before the capability approach can become effective for a particular purpose' (Robeyns 2017, 29, emphasis in original). Robeyns distinguishes between the capability approach, an open-ended conceptual framework with certain core

theoretical bloat and confusion. Instead, Robeyns posits it as an underspecified framework that can be – or rather, must be – 'specified' into various distinct theories depending on the research purpose and scope. This underspecified nature is a deliberate feature, allowing the capability approach to be adaptable to diverse contexts, from assessing gender justice in Western welfare states (Robeyns 2003), to global education (Walker & Unterhalter 2007), to child development and poverty measurement (Alkire 2002; Biggeri et al. 2011), or indeed, to the aspiration-capability framework in migration studies.

Across these varied applications, however, researchers face a persistent measurement challenge. Capabilities refer to potential – to what people could do and be – and are therefore not directly observable. Most empirical assessments thus rely on achieved functionings as proxies for capabilities, measuring what people actually do, rather than what they are free to do. For example, the Human Development Index (HDI), developed by Mahbub ul Haq together with Amartya Sen, was the first major attempt to operationalize the capabilities approach for global comparison, measuring health (life expectancy), education (years of schooling), and living standards (GNI per capita) (UNDP 1990). By ranking countries based on these functionings rather than just income, the HDI showed that countries with high GDP could still have relatively low levels of human development and vice versa. HDI measures what people achieve rather than the freedoms they have to achieve them; this distinction between functioning and capability (or between observed outcomes and substantive freedoms) matters more for some assessments than others. I will argue it is central to the study of the capability to stay, because staying is a functioning that cannot be taken at face value. A person who remains in place may be exercising genuine freedom or may have no viable alternative, and distinguishing between these requires attention to capability rather than behavior alone. I address strategies for operationalizing the capability to stay in Section 4. The next section turns to how the concept of capability has been taken up in migration studies specifically.

2 The Capability Turn in Migration Research

For much of the late twentieth century, migration theory was dominated by a divide between functionalist and historical-structuralist paradigms (Massey et al., 1998; de Haas et al., 2019). While these approaches diverged sharply on the causes and consequences of migration – functionalists predicting equilibrium and continued modernization, structuralists predicting deepening inequality and dependency – they share a fundamental underlying assumption that migration is viewed primarily through an instrumental lens. Whether cast as a rational strategy for income maximization or a desperate flight from capitalist encroachment, migration is most often conceptualized as a means to an (often economic) end, rather than a meaningful aspect of human well-being in its own right.

Recent scholarship drawing on the capability approach has begun to challenge this instrumentalist view in what might be called the 'capability turn' in micro-level migration theory. The core reframing is captured in a distinction Preibisch et al. (2016) draw between 'migration for capability'. where movement is valued only insofar as it expands human capital or financial assets, and 'migration as capability', where mobility is recognized as an intrinsically valuable human functioning.

characteristics, and capability *theories* that are more defined and specific to the particular purposes (e.g., a theory of social justice versus a policy evaluation). In *Wellbeing, Freedom and Social Justice (2017)*, she clarifies the theoretical core of the CA common across all uses and what aspects can reasonably vary depending on scope and application.

Others have challenged the instrumentalist view by making a distinction between the instrumental and intrinsic value of migration. Carling (2024) offers a succinct distinction: migration is instrumental when it serves as a means to an objective – such as safety, livelihoods, or education – that could, hypothetically, be achieved through alternative means in the place of origin. However, Carling notes that migration also carries intrinsic value when the act of moving itself is the source of 'experience, adventure, or authority' that cannot be obtained by staying put (Carling 2024, 1773; see also de Haas 2021). In such cases, particularly for youth in high-emigration contexts or where a 'culture of migration' (Cohen 2004) has taken hold, mobility may be a rite of passage or a constitutive element of a good life.

This reframing shifts the analytical focus from the act of moving to the freedom to choose. As de Haas posits, 'we can define human mobility *as people's capability (freedom) to choose where to live* – including the option to stay – rather than the act of moving itself.' (2021, 31, emphasis in original). With a slight reframing, we might say the true measure of 'mobility freedom' encompasses both the capability to migrate and the capability to stay. The aspiration-capability framework, now the primary vehicle for capability-informed migration research, has developed the first of these far more than the second. The following subsections review this framework and its contributions before turning, in Section 3, to the concept of the capability to stay.

2.1 The Aspiration-Capability Framework

The rapid rise and application of the aspiration-capability framework is the primary way in which the concept of capability, particularly the 'capability to migrate', is being used in migration research. The 2021 article outlining the framework by de Haas, 'A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework', has already been cited well over 1500 times in the first five years since its publication. The framework offers a conceptual approach to understanding and studying human mobility that gives greater attention to the interplay of structure and agency at the micro-level and helps explain why immobility outcomes are higher than traditional migration theories would predict (Schewel 2020; Hammar et al. 1997; Massey et al., 1998).

The framework's central proposition is deceptively simple: migration occurs as a function of both the aspiration and the capability to migrate (cf. Carling 2002).[3] *Aspirations* refer to a conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration – a preference that can vary in intensity and in the balance between choice and coercion (Carling & Schewel 2018). De Haas describes migration aspirations as 'a function of people's general life aspirations and perceived geographical opportunity structures' (2021, 2). In other words, aspirations to migrate or stay arise in relation to opportunities at home and elsewhere.

The *capability to migrate* may be defined as the substantive freedom to leave one's place of residence and successfully reach and settle in another location. It encompasses both the resources required for movement (economic, social, human, or institutional) and the structural conditions that enable or constrain it (legal rights to exit and enter, border regimes, or other 'conversion factors' that determine whether resources translate into actual mobility). De Haas describes migration capabilities as being

[3] The core distinction between the aspiration to migrate and the ability to do so was originally proposed by Carling (2002) as the 'aspiration/ability model' to explain the prevalence of frustrated migration desires in Cape Verde. The framework has been subsequently refined and expanded through engagement with Sen's capability approach (as engaged here) (Sen, 1999), Berlin's concepts of positive and negative liberty (Berlin, 1969; see de Haas ,2021), and Stephen Castles' social transformation perspective (Castles, 2010; see de Haas 2014, 2021; Carling & Schewel 2018; Schewel 2020, 2025; Castles 2010).

'contingent on positive ("freedom to") and negative ("freedom from") liberties' (2021, cf. Berlin 1969). Negative liberty – freedom from external constraints – encompasses the legal, political, and physical obstacles to movement, including immigration restrictions, border controls, and exit prohibitions. Positive liberty – the freedom to realize one's purposes – relates to the resources and conditions that enable people to act on their preferences. A person may enjoy nominal freedom of movement (negative liberty) yet lack the financial resources, social connections, or knowledge to actually migrate (positive liberty). Conversely, those with abundant resources may face legal barriers that prevent migration regardless of their capabilities in other respects.

The disaggregation between aspiration and capability allows researchers to ask distinct questions about why people want to move (or stay) and why they can or cannot act on those preferences. The theoretical significance of this separation becomes apparent when considering what conventional migration theories obscure. Push-pull models and neoclassical frameworks implicitly assume that people respond to external stimuli – wage differentials, opportunity gaps, environmental pressures – in predictable and uniform ways. They tend to treat preferences as constant across societies and often reduce agency to rational cost-benefit calculations. Historical-structural theories, while attentive to the role of coercion and inequality in shaping migration systems, tend to portray migrants as pawns of macro-forces, leaving little conceptual space for genuine agency (de Haas et al., 2019). Attention to aspiration in the aspiration-capability framework reveals widespread heterogeneity in migration desires among populations subject to similar push factors or structural conditions, and has allowed researchers to highlight the agency behind decisions to migrate or to stay even under conditions most commonly associated with 'forced migration' (see Müller-Funk et al. 2023).

Another benefit of the aspiration-capability framework is that it provides a conceptual approach that resists the mobility bias in migration research – that is, an overconcentration of theoretical and empirical attention on the determinants and consequences of mobility and, by extension, the concomitant neglect of immobility. As I have argued elsewhere, this combination distorts understandings of the social forces shaping (im)mobility dynamics (Schewel 2020). By separating the aspiration from the capability to migrate, the framework yields four ideal-typical (im)mobility categories: mobility (migration aspiration plus migration capability), involuntary immobility (migration aspiration without migration capability), voluntary immobility (staying aspiration despite capability to migrate), and acquiescent immobility (neither migration aspiration nor capability) (see Figure 2).

The distinction between aspirations and capabilities to move has been particularly illuminating within the rapid growth of scholarship on environmental change and migration. Early scholarship assumed that climate change would lead to mass displacement, yet empirical research consistently finds a surprisingly large number of people remain immobile in the face of environmental risks and hazards (Mallick & Schanze 2020; Zickgraf 2019; Tinoco 2023). To help explain these immobility outcomes, this scholarship tends to focus on either the aspiration to stay (voluntary immobility) (e.g., Adams 2016; Farbotko 2018; Blondin 2021) or the lack of migration capability (involuntary immobility or 'trapped' populations) (e.g., Black & Collyer 2014; Ayeb-Karlsson et al. 2018; DeWaard et al. 2022, Benveniste et al. 2022). However, several focused case studies applying the aspiration/ability model or aspiration-capability framework have noted the need to better integrate a focus on the (cap)ability to stay into aspiration-capability assessments (e.g., Van Praag 2021; Mallick & Schanze 2020; Tinoco 2023; Salvo et al. 2023; Gotehus 2023).

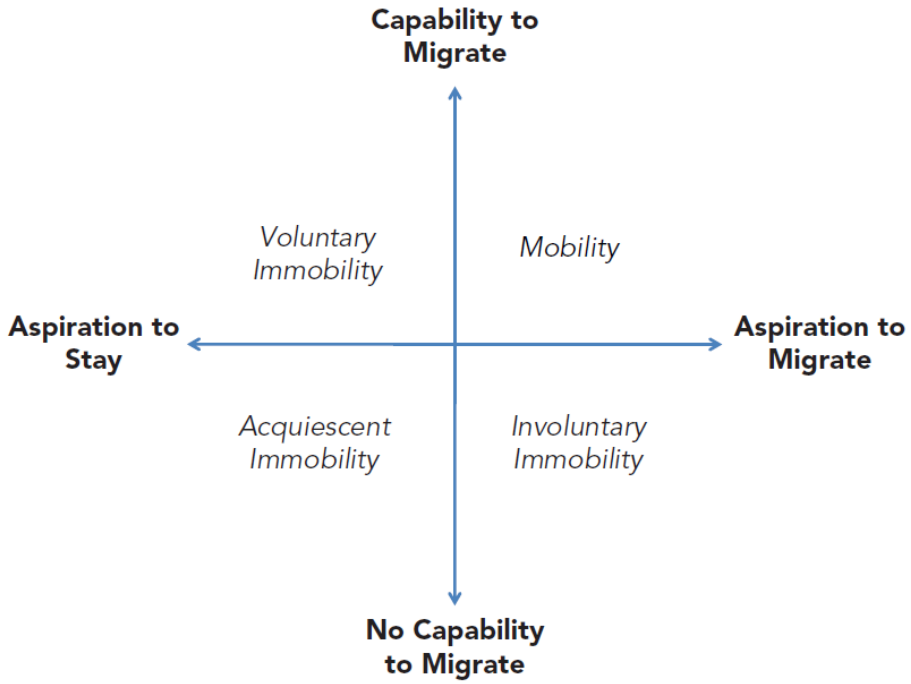

Figure 2. (Im)mobility Categories Suggested by the Aspiration-Capability Framework When Focused on Capability to Migrate. Reproduced from Schewel (2020, 335).

2.2 Explaining Migration-Development Interactions

Given that the capability approach emerged from the field of development studies, it has particular value for understanding the relationship between migration and development. The capability approach provides richer language to explore how changes in economic, social, cultural, and political conditions at origin affect mobility in two distinct ways: by reshaping what people aspire to, and by expanding or constraining what they are able to achieve. Much of the migration-development nexus scholarship that gained prominence in the 2000s and 2010s adopted a narrower view, championing migrants as 'agents of development' whose remittances fuel economic growth while treating migrant well-being and dignity as secondary trade-offs (Preibisch et al. 2016; Faist 2008; Nyberg–Sørensen et al. 2002). A capability lens reframes the question: rather than asking what migration can do for development, it asks how development reshapes the freedoms people have to move and to stay, and how mobility, in turn, impacts broader social changes (see de Haas 2009).

This section narrates three stories of migration-development interactions – from Morocco, Mexico, and Ethiopia – to explore contrasting accounts of why rising levels of development correlate with rising levels of out-migration. When I use the term 'development' here, I mean the deliberate pursuit of progress (e.g., economic growth, infrastructure development, education, health, and improved well-being). My usage is agnostic about whether such projects achieve their stated aims or whether the social changes made in the name of development constitute 'progress' (see also Rist 1997[4]). My focus is more

[4] Rist defines development in terms of what it actually does, rather than what it claims to do: 'Development consists of a set of practices, sometimes appearing to conflict with one another, which require – for the reproduction of society – the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social

sociological – on development as a social project and imaginary that animates national governments, local communities, international institutions, and development aid (Schewel 2025). My analyses put emphasis on either expanding aspirations and capabilities to migrate or eroding aspirations and capabilities to stay, which reveals significantly different implications for how we understand the migration-development nexus.

The beginnings of the aspiration-capability framework arose out of a pattern observed by de Haas during his fieldwork in Morocco's Todgha Valley that defied conventional migration theory (de Haas 2003). 'Despite significant increases in income and general living conditions over previous decades,' he writes, 'out-migration from the Todgha valley to big cities in Morocco and, particularly, European countries like France, the Netherlands and Spain had continued unabated' (2021, 17). Neo-classical economic theories and push-pull models would have predicted decreased emigration as local living standards improved. This inspired de Haas to adopt the concepts of aspirations and capabilities to explain what he was observing:

> 'Although local living conditions had improved significantly in preceding decades, people's general life aspirations had increased faster, leading to growing migration aspirations. Improved education, increased media exposure alongside the regular return of the migrant 'role models' and exposure to their relative wealth had all contributed to rapidly increasing material and changing social aspirations of people living in the valley. Particularly international migration had become so strongly associated with material and social success that many youngsters had become virtually obsessed with leaving. This 'culture of migration' also contributed to rapidly changing ideas of the 'good life' and an increasing disaffection with traditional, agrarian lifestyles. So, growing aspirations and capabilities to migrate had inspired and enabled increasing numbers of people to leave the valley despite, or paradoxically rather because of, significant improvements in local living standards, income and education (de Haas 2021, 17).'

By conceptualizing migration as a function of people's aspirations and capabilities to migrate within a given set of opportunity structures, de Haas was able to explain how development increases both aspirations and capabilities to migrate while reshaping local opportunity structures. This insight animated much of de Haas' subsequent scholarship, which argues that development does not simply reduce push factors as conventional theories assume, but simultaneously expands migration capabilities (through increased income, education, and social capital) and reshapes aspirations (through exposure to new ideas, consumption patterns, and visions of a good life). The net effect, particularly in low- and middle-income countries' development, is often increased rather than decreased emigration (see de Haas 2007, 2010, 2021).

The narrative de Haas advances in relation to Morocco is a relatively positive one. Rising aspirations and capabilities to migrate are inseparably intertwined with other expanding aspirations and capabilities: rising education, increasing incomes, greater connectivity. Although local living conditions had improved, life aspirations had expanded more rapidly than local opportunities could keep up with, and this 'aspiration-opportunity gap' drove rising international migration (see also Berriane et al. 2021).

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relations. Its aim is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange, to effective demand' (Rist 1997, 8).

Implicit in this narrative is the notion that the 'capability set' required to realize the lives one values changes over time as life aspirations change.

A second story of migration-development interactions is arguably more pessimistic and puts emphasis on the erosion of the capability to stay. This case study focuses on the impact of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on Mexican migration to the United States. In *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration*, David Bacon (2013) traces the impacts of US investment in the pork industry in Veracruz, Mexico after NAFTA. Across Mexico, the opening of concentrated animal feeding operations, more popularly known as factory farms, significantly undercut local producers. Foreign-owned factory farms imported feed from the United States, where soybeans and corn are heavily subsidized by congressional farm bills. New economies of scale, bolstered by U.S. government subsidies favoring their own farmers, made it extremely difficult for corn farmers and small pork producers in Mexico to compete. Thus, between 1995 – the year NAFTA took effect – and 2010, pork prices received by Mexican producers dropped 56 per cent, and four thousand Mexican pig farms closed. Many other sectors of the rural economy were similarly affected by the influx of foreign capital and competition. This is a familiar story associated with the globalization of trade and capital flows that characterizes the last several decades of neoliberal globalization and international development agendas.

In Veracruz specifically, Bacon traces the impacts of a massive, mechanized hog-raising facility introduced by a subsidiary of Smithfield Foods. In addition to the economic challenges to small farmers described above, he also details severe environmental harms associated with the concentrated animal feeding operation. With less regulation, the factory farms used inadequate waste management procedures, leading to the contamination of the local water table. Many people left Veracruz during this period – and a significant share were recruited by Smithfield to work at an associated slaughterhouse in Tar Heel, North Carolina, thus supplying the company with a cheap labor force in the United States.

In this example, US investment in Mexico helped increase national-level GDP, contributing to the country's development from a narrow economic perspective. Yet there were substantial local costs in places like Veracruz, including rising health problems, inequality, and unemployment. Aspirations to migrate increased, but the story Bacon presents is hardly a story of rising education, incomes, or empowerment like de Haas observed in Morocco. For rural communities in Veracruz, the consequences of this development strategy resonate more with what Andre Gunder Frank referred to as the 'development of underdevelopment' (Frank 1969). Thus, Bacon focuses his narrative on the growing resistance of Mexican communities to their country's development model and their political activism for 'the right to stay home.'

Now consider a final case study from Ethiopia. In *Moved by Modernity* (2025), I present in detail the mobility history of one village called Wayisso in the central lowlands of Ethiopia, tracing how mobility patterns shifted across generations and why from the 1990s through the 2010s, rural out-migration increased as the country experienced dramatic gains in human development. I found that an analysis that relied primarily on aspirations and capabilities to migrate as core concepts was inadequate to capture the nature of (im)mobility in that context. Consider two very different narratives one could tell about the relationship between migration and development depending on whether the emphasis is on aspirations and capabilities to migrate or aspirations and capabilities to stay (see Schewel 2025, 238-239).

The first is a positive and optimistic one: Ethiopia's rapid development from the 1990s onwards brought rising levels of education, income, and connectivity, which in turn increased the aspirations and capabilities of growing numbers to migrate. Young people began leaving Wayisso in the 1990s for towns and cities to gain knowledge, skills, and opportunities for employment in a diversifying and urbanizing economy. Entrepreneurship has reached new heights, and opportunities for wage-based employment continue to expand in Oromiya as foreign investment supports the growth of industrial work. A growing number choose to migrate internationally for work abroad. Young women, in particular, migrate to the Middle East to escape what some describe as the suffocating social norms of traditional society and to realize new levels of financial and social independence. From this vantage point, heightened spatial mobility links to other forms of social, economic, and intellectual mobility. In this telling, migration is not a sign of poverty, nor a problem. Rather, it is a 'natural' part of the development process. To use the language of the aspiration-capability framework, development drives migration from Wayisso because it increases aspirations and capabilities to migrate, and rising migration reflects a community's expanding aspirations and capabilities to live modern, urban lives.

Yet, there is another, more critical and pessimistic story I could tell. In this narrative, Ethiopia's development has accelerated the commodification of social life, environmental degradation, and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems and culture. In Wayisso, this story would highlight the decline in dignity and self-determination that comes with 'modern' work. A traditional community of pastoralists is now working as wage-laborers in an industrial animal processing facility owned by foreign capitalists that exports beef for Middle Eastern markets. Young women, faced with limited economic prospects locally, migrate as far as Saudi Arabia to clean the homes of wealthier families, often under exploitative conditions, just to get the capital needed to return, move to town, and open a simple shop. Further, despite increased access to formal schooling, the country's current education system fails to impart relevant knowledge or skills for rural livelihoods, nor are there sufficient salaried or professional jobs to employ Ethiopia's growing young population. Economic inequalities have widened, leaving a too-large segment of the population feeling 'stuck' in the village and increasingly vulnerable to droughts that threaten to become more frequent and severe. This narrative focuses less on aspirations and capability to migrate and more on aspirations and capabilities to stay, and in this telling, capitalist development drives migration because it erodes a community's capability to stay and progress in place.

Is it possible for both narratives to be true? Some in Wayisso tell versions of the first story, while others tell versions of the second. There are also certainly academics espousing these different narratives – from those working with mainstream development institutions to post-development scholars advocating that we abandon the idea and project of 'development' altogether (see Kothari et al. 2019).[5] Perhaps these stories provide different lenses on the nature of social transformation in the modern period. Development can lead to empowerment in some domains and disempowerment in others. Put another way, the pursuit of development can increase aspirations and capabilities to migrate at the same time that it erodes aspirations and capabilities to stay – particularly in rural places.

[5] These tensions are not unique to Ethiopia. Miyai (2026), analyzing Skills Mobility Partnerships through a capability lens, identifies a structural version of the same dilemma: policies designed to enhance individual capabilities through migration can simultaneously undermine collective capabilities in origin communities. His analysis suggests that the coexistence of capability expansion and capability erosion is a fundamental and recurring feature of how development and migration interact.

Beyond development, we live in a time with rising threats to the capability to stay, whether from environmental hazards related to climate change, new and protracted conflicts, or economic insecurities as the darker side of global capitalism continues to penetrate all reaches of the planet. Now at the end of a long and productive career studying the relationship between migration and development, Douglas Massey warns that migration theories need to better grapple with the forces of displacement in the 21st century: 'As the twenty-first century unfolds, international migration from developing to developed nations increasingly appears to be motivated not by a desire to access social and economic opportunities, but by a need to escape threats to physical well-being stemming from a variety of new sources: ecological disasters, state failures, and rising civil and criminal violence' (Massey 2018, 3). While this warning risks obscuring the powerful role of aspirations for social and economic mobility that continue to motivate migration flows around the world, it does highlight the need to integrate attention to the forces of displacement in theorizing about the causes of migration, and not treat them as a separate category of forced migration. Integrating the capability to stay into the language and application of the aspiration-capability framework is one way to do so.

3 The Capability to Stay

The 'capability to stay' asks a fundamental question: Do people possess the freedom and opportunity to realize the lives they value in the places where they currently reside? In the study of immobility, this concept shifts the analytical focus from the absence of movement to the presence of substantive freedoms in place. Unlike the aspiration to stay, which generally describes a preference, the capability to stay addresses potentiality and directs attention to the structural conditions that make staying viable and desirable.

The concept of the capability to stay requires at least three clarifications in relation to the research context and question. First, what constitutes staying? The answer entails setting spatial boundaries (e.g., staying in a village, a region, an island, or a state). While the capability to stay may be most immediately associated with 'origin' communities, it may also be applied to other contexts. For example, one might assess whether immigrants have the capability to stay in particular cities or countries of destination.

Second, over what time frame is 'staying' being assessed (e.g., staying for the next year, ten years, a lifetime, or generations)? Incorporating a temporal lens would, even at the individual level, allow mobility to function as a mechanism to 'stay' over a longer period. In other words, being able to migrate and work elsewhere for several years may enable someone to return and settle in place over the longer term. In this way, staying and leaving are not inherently substitutes, but in certain contexts, may be complementary (see section 4.2 on the links between migration and staying capabilities). Setting these spatial and temporal boundaries make the concept of staying empirically tractable.

Third, is the capability to stay being assessed in relation to an individual, a household, or a community? While the capability to migrate has primarily been applied to assess individual capability, empirical assessments of migration capability have also taken place at the household or even national level (see Rodriguez 2025). In the absence of individual-level data, it can be helpful to use higher-level assessments of migration or staying potential. Further, particularly in contexts of conflict or environmental hazards, it may be useful to speak about the erosion of the capability to stay for entire communities, even if individual-level capabilities vary significantly within these communities.

A core challenge to assessing the capability to stay is that, unlike the capability to migrate, which is revealed through migration, it cannot be inferred simply from the fact of non-migration (Schewel 2021). To use capabilities approach language, the functioning of staying is not a proxy for capability. The capability to migrate is revealed when individuals successfully navigate a migration process (and all the costs and constraints entailed) from Place A to Place B. The capability to stay, as I am defining it here, is a more complex concept. It exists when an individual has the real opportunity to achieve the life they have reason to value in situ and is thus rooted in the quality and sustainability of Place A itself (see also Tinoco 2023).

When the capability to stay is assessed in relation to an individual, it addresses an individual's capability set *with respect to place*. It asks whether someone can achieve the functionings they have reason to value (e.g., adequate livelihood, health, social connections, environmental security, political voice) where they are. Yet, many of the conditions that determine whether individuals can achieve valued functionings in place, such as functioning local institutions, environmental commons, social safety nets, shared knowledge systems, are collective by nature. Ibrahim (2006) introduces the concept of 'collective capabilities' to highlight capabilities that emerge through collective action and shared social structures and that cannot be reduced to the sum of individual capabilities. Miyai (2026) applies this concept to origin communities in migration contexts, arguing that collective capabilities such as institutional capacity and community infrastructure should constitute a distinct analytical object in migration and development research.

Whether assessing the capability to stay at the individual or community level, recognizing the capability to stay is essential because its presence or absence fundamentally alters the nature of migration. Migration looks radically different depending on whether the migrant *could* have stayed. When the capability to stay is intact, migration becomes an expression of voluntary mobility – a choice made from a position of relative security to pursue new opportunities or experiences. Conversely, when the capability to stay is eroded – whether by conflict, economic insecurity, or environmental degradation – movement assumes a less free or more distressed character. Thus, the capability to stay serves, at the very least, as a critical discursive tool: it provides richer language to describe the nature of migration across the wide spectrum of forced to voluntary movement.

3.1 A Revised Typology

By integrating the aspiration and capability to stay alongside the aspiration and capability to migrate, a wider range of (im)mobility configurations emerges. Building on previous calls or attempts to better acknowledge dimensions of force or coercion in the aspiration-capability framework (see Mallick & Schanze 2020, Mallick et al. 2023, Zickgraf 2021, de Haas 2021), Figure 3 crosses migration capability with staying capability to produce four configurations that characterize contexts of varied mobility freedom or unfreedom. These configurations do not determine behavior. Rather, they describe the conditions within which migration decisions are made. Within each configuration, individuals may aspire to stay or to migrate, and these aspirations interact with capabilities to produce distinct (im)mobility outcomes.

One configuration – **Mobility Freedom** – serves as a normative benchmark, the ideal-typical version of which is characterized by high migration capability and high staying capability. The remaining three configurations represent distinct forms of mobility unfreedom, depending on which capability is constrained. In what follows, I describe each configuration and illustrate how aspirations to stay or migrate at the individual level produce qualitatively different outcomes within them.

Within the Mobility Freedom configuration, a person can live the life they have reason to value in place or convert their resources into migration that realizes their aspirations. In this context, aspirations differentiate outcomes without altering their voluntary character. Those who aspire to stay and do so exercise *voluntary immobility*, remaining in place because they can achieve the lives they value where they are. Those who aspire to migrate and do so exercise v*oluntary mobility* – leaving to pursue opportunities, experiences, or aspirations that migration distinctly enables. In both cases, the person could choose otherwise, and acts on authentic preference rather than constraint.

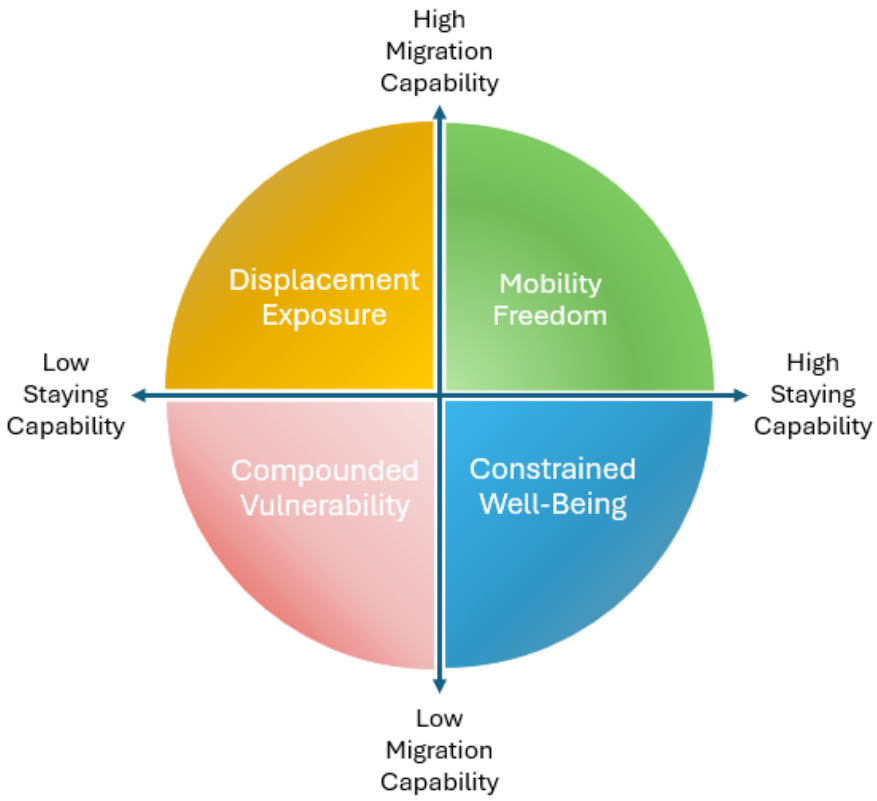

Figure 3. Four Capability Configurations Crossing Migration and Staying Capability

The second category – **Displacement Exposure** – is characterized by high migration capability and low staying capability. In this configuration, the capability to migrate exists, but the capability to live well in place does not. Migration under these conditions is not fully voluntary – it is inevitably shaped by the lack of staying capability, which may be undermined by environmental hazards, economic precarity, conflict, or persecution.

Bacon's (2013) case study of Veracruz narrates a context of displacement exposure: the capability to stay eroded at the same time that the capability to migrate internationally increased through Smithfield's labor recruitment. In this setting, those who aspire to stay may experience what might be called *precarious immobility*, where they may choose to stay but are unable to build a sustainable or desirable life in place (cf Transiskus and Bazarbash 2024). Those who migrate from these contexts may be described in a variety of ways: forced displacement may be appropriate in contexts where staying

capability is completely eroded, or one might observe *distress mobility* where movement is not made from a position of freedom.

Alternatively, as in Wayisso, one may find more typical forms of migration occurring from these contexts as well: migration for education, work, marriage, among others, where 'force' is not the best lens to analyze these migratory movements, yet to describe such migration solely in terms of expanding migration aspirations and capabilities misses something essential about the structural conditions producing it – namely the lack of the capability to stay.

The third category – **Constrained Well-being** – is characterized by low migration capability but high staying capability. In this configuration, a person can achieve relatively high levels of well-being where they are but lack the resources or opportunities to migrate. Those who aspire to stay may experience this constraint as largely irrelevant, as their aspirational horizons are oriented toward a future in place, and migration is not a meaningful part of how they envision a good life. One might consider, for example, intentional communities or Indigenous communities who experience a strong sense of place attachment and may have a different vision of living well that they are able to realize in place.

Those who aspire to migrate, however, experience a real deprivation of freedom – even where staying capability is high. Here, a distinction between instrumental and intrinsic dimensions of migration is useful (cf. Carling 2024). In this context, the instrumental aims of migration (e.g., income, safety, education) may be achievable locally. What remains foreclosed is the intrinsic value of migration: the experience, adventure, self-transformation, or social recognition that migration itself confers. This configuration may be particularly salient for youth in high-emigration contexts, for example, where migration operates as a rite of passage and staying, however comfortable materially, carries a personal or social cost.

The final category – **Compounded Vulnerability** – is characterized by low migration capability and low staying capability. This is the configuration of greatest concern – those who cannot achieve the lives they value in place yet lack the capability to seek better lives elsewhere. This is the configuration existing scholarship on immobility has engaged most directly, though under different labels: 'trapped populations' in environmental migration research (see Ayeb-Karlsson et al. 2018), 'involuntary immobility' in contexts of conflict (Lubkemann 2008) as well as in more general migration research (Carling 2002).

However, there may also be populations who, even in contexts of significant deprivation, still prefer to stay in place – what I have referred to as 'acquiescent immobility' elsewhere (Schewel 2020). Those who do not aspire to leave contexts of compounded vulnerability present a more analytically challenging case. In some instances, individuals may have never meaningfully considered moving despite constrained circumstances (Mata-Codesal 2018, Schewel 2020), or they may lack the 'capacity to aspire', as de Haas (2021) argues. Others may express conscious place commitment despite severe deprivation; for example, people who refuse to leave war-torn settings or those who remain in the path of environmental hazards because place itself is constitutive of their identity or purpose. The configuration of Compounded Vulnerability highlights the multidimensional vulnerabilities faced by both those who aspire to migrate and to stay in such settings.

These conceptual categories function as ideal types. An ideal type is a simplified, abstract model highlighting the essential characteristics of a social phenomenon that can serve as a benchmark for analyzing an inevitably more complex social reality. As Max Weber initially proposed, ideal types

provide an abstract ideal against which 'the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components' (Weber 1949, 90). As in earlier applications of the aspiration-capability framework, it is in the tension between these ideal types and complex empirical realities that advances understanding and comparative insight.

It is possible to (and previous iterations of this paper attempted to) develop an eight-fold typology of (im)mobility outcomes within Figure 3. One could name different kinds of mobility or immobility outcomes that emerge from the aspiration to migrate or the aspiration to stay in each of these contexts. For example, I suggested 'distress migration' (aspiration to migrate) or 'precarious immobility' (aspiration to stay) within contexts of displacement exposure). However, ideal types and the conceptual frameworks they inspire are most useful when they are parsimonious; the multiplication of categories can quickly become too unwieldy to guide research. There is also a risk of reproducing categorical or binary thinking when aspirations and capabilities are best analyzed as existing along a spectrum (see also Rodriguez 2025; Schewel 2020).

The core contribution, I hope, is simpler: the aspiration-capability framework requires attention to staying capability alongside migration capability if it is to account for the full spectrum of voluntary and involuntary movement. Researchers may find the typology described above useful for certain purposes – particularly for surfacing configurations like precarious immobility, distress migration, or other types of (im)mobility that previous aspiration-capability formulations obscure. But the concept of the capability to stay stands on its own as an analytical tool. It asks a question that migration research has largely neglected: not only whether people can or want to migrate, but whether they can achieve well-being where they are. And the answer to that question has significant implications for the nature of migration and immobility in those contexts.

3.2 Conversion Factors

'Conversion factors' are a complementary set of concepts to the capability to stay (and the capability to migrate). The capability approach literature conceptualizes conversion factors as the conditions that determine whether available resources can be transformed into valued functionings. These are typically theorized as personal, social, and environmental factors or conditions (see Robeyns 2017, 45-47). Using a bicycle as the classic illustration, the mere possession of the bicycle does not guarantee the functioning of mobility; rather, this capability is mediated by factors including personal characteristics (e.g., physical ability, knowledge of how to ride a bike), environmental infrastructure (e.g., the availability of clear terrain, paved roads or bike lanes), and social structures (e.g., societal restrictions on women's mobility) (see Robeyns & Byskov 2025) (See Figure 4).

This section reinterprets select migration research using the language of capabilities and conversion factors to illustrate their potential relevance to advancing a research agenda on the capability to stay and the aspiration-capability approach more broadly. Inspired by the social transformation framework, I disaggregate the social domain to explore distinct political, economic, and sociocultural factors that shape whether people have the capability to achieve their aspirations (see de Haas et al. 2020; Castles, 2010).[6]

[6] Conversion factors are relevant to the study of any capability, including the capability to migrate and to stay, but the same conversion factor may enhance one capability while constraining the other, or may be necessary for one but irrelevant to the other. This asymmetry is part of what makes the capability to stay analytically distinct from – rather than simply the inverse of – the capability to migrate.

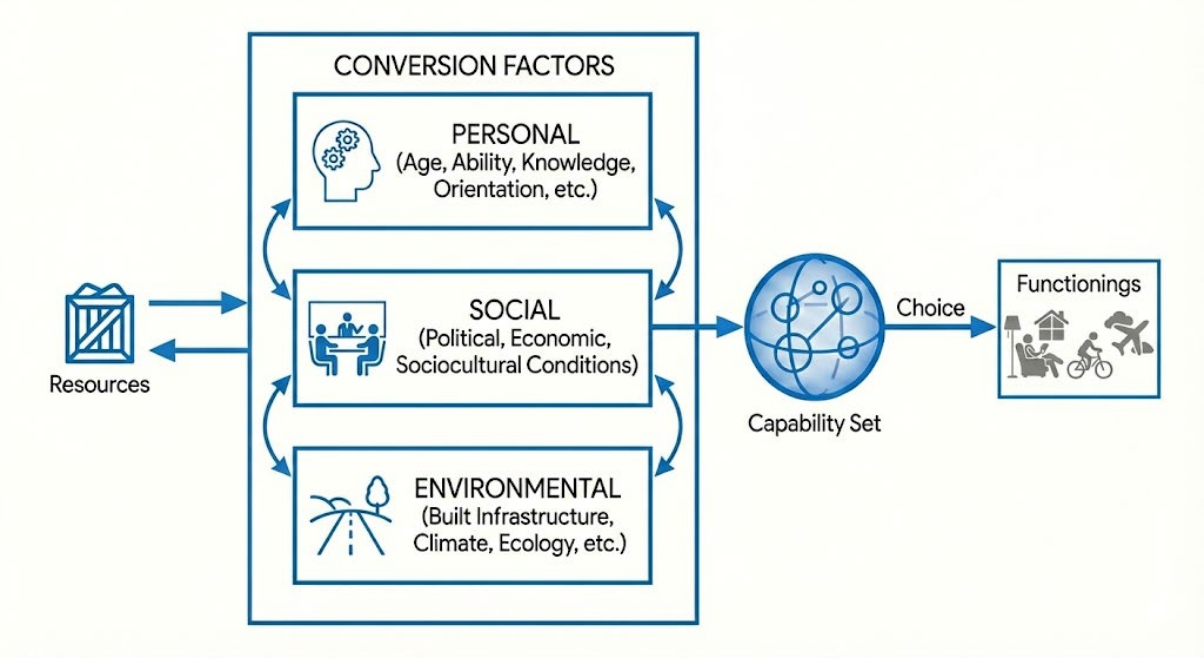

Figure 4. Core Concepts of the Capability Approach with an Expanded Illustration of Conversion Factors. Image generated using Google Gemini

Personal Conversion Factors

Personal conversion factors are internal to the individual and include factors such as age, gender, physical health, cognitive capacities, skills, and psychological orientation. Health and disability offer the most intuitive examples of personal conversion factors relevant to both staying and migration capabilities. For example, a person requiring specialized medical care unavailable locally may lack the capability to stay even if other resources are abundant; conversely, chronic illness or severe disability may constrain migration capability even when legal pathways and financial resources would otherwise make movement possible.

Personal conversion factors resonate with what Rodriguez-Peña (2023) calls 'internal capabilities', which she describes as the resources, skills, aptitudes, and attitudes that allow one to realize one's aspirations.[7] Personal conversion factors also encompass a long-standing body of migration research focused on cognitive capacities and psychological orientations – from recent work on risk perceptions, cognitive biases, and heuristics in migration decision-making (see Czaika & Reinprecht 2022; Czaika 2015) to classic work that highlights the importance of personality factors on migration propensities.

[7] According to Rodriguez-Peña, external capabilities refer to the societal and/or structural conditions necessary to create the opportunity to realize one's aspirations (what resonates with social and environmental conversion factors here). This resonates with how Nussbaum (2011) distinguishes between internal capabilities – developed states of personal readiness – and 'combined capabilities,' which pair internal capabilities with the external social, political, and material conditions necessary to actually exercise a function. These distinctions do similar analytical work as the 'conversion factors' introduced by Sen and further explicated by Robeyns (see Robeyns 2017), making explicit how structural conditions mediate between personal capacities and realized freedoms. I prefer conversion factors here to offer a more granular mechanism for tracing how specific social, environmental, and institutional conditions shape capability sets (including the capability to stay).

As Everett Lee (1966) originally noted in the first formulation of what came to be known as push-pull theory,

> 'It is not so much the actual factors at origin and destination as the perception of these factors which results in migration. Personal sensitivities, intelligence, and awareness of conditions elsewhere enter into the evaluation of the situation as origin, and knowledge of the situation at destination depends upon personal contacts or upon sources of information which are not universally available. In addition, there are personalities which are resistant to change – change of residence as well as other changes – and there are personalities which welcome change for the sake of change. For some individuals, there must be compelling reasons for migration, while for others little provocation or promise suffices' (51).

In a more recent study in rural Honduras, Wyngaarden et al. (2022) identify what they call the 'capacity to envision' – the ability to see practical pathways from available resources to sustainable local livelihoods – as essential to supporting the capability to stay in that context. They suggest youth who possessed land, family support, and access to education but lacked this capacity to envision a local future could not convert those resources into staying capability. One respondent said those who migrated 'do not visualize the opportunities' (223). Another stayer described themselves as able to see opportunities for sustainable livelihoods where others saw only scarcity. The authors highlight this cognitive-imaginative dimension to argue that staying capability depends not only on what resources exist but on whether individuals can perceive how to combine and deploy them to create desirable futures in place.

Social Conversion Factors

Social conversion factors refer broadly to conditions associated with the society in which one lives. Given the wide range of conversion factors in this bucket (e.g., public policies and legal frameworks, social norms and culture, power relations related to class, gender, race, or caste; see Robeyns 2017), the following distinguishes political, economic, and cultural dimensions of social conversion factors. However, in doing so, it is important to remember that specific conversion factors rarely (if ever) operate in isolation: their effects depend on how they interact with other personal, social, and environmental conditions.

Political factors include the legal frameworks, public policies, institutions, and power hierarchies that shape the opportunities available to achieve well-being in place. For example, policies that formalize property rights for smallholders might enhance staying capability by providing security for long-term investment, access to credit, and legal protection against displacement (Shelby 2017; Lawry et al. 2017). Similarly, legal recognition of collective territorial rights can protect communities' capability to stay against encroachment, extraction, or forced displacement (O'Sullivan 2020). Social welfare programs like pensions, cash transfers, or healthcare coverage may also enable people – particularly the elderly – to remain well in place (Jolivet 2024; Galiani et al. 2016).

Conversely, development-induced displacement, or the forced relocation of people from their homes and communities due to large-scale development projects, such as dams, mines, infrastructure (roads, railways), urbanization, or conservation areas (de Wet 2006), is the clearest example of the erosion of staying capability due to political factors. Recent research finds more subtle political factors can also severely impact the perceived ability to progress in place. Vargas-Silva et al. (2023), for example, find that levels of government corruption are strongly related to aspirations to leave across a wide variety of

countries. Put another way, the prevalence of government corruption is a political condition that undermines people's perceived ability to live well in that place. While these examples emphasize political factors from an origin community perspective, legal factors are particularly consequential for migrants and immigrant communities 'at destination'. Securing permanent legal status or citizenship significantly bolsters an immigrant's capability to stay while precarious or unauthorized status and robust immigration enforcement diminishes it.

Economic factors shape whether material resources, knowledge, skills, and labor can be translated into sustainable livelihoods in place. For example, local labor market conditions determine whether education and skills can be converted into local employment; a young person may complete vocational training or university education, but if no local employers require their skills or credentials, their human capital cannot be converted into staying capability. Further, access to credit and markets shapes whether land, ideas, or entrepreneurial capacity can be converted into productive enterprises. A farmer may possess land and agricultural knowledge, for example, but may not be able to invest in irrigation, equipment, or improved inputs without access to affordable credit – leaving those resources 'unconverted' into viable livelihoods. Conversely, cooperative economic arrangements may be seen as strategies to enhance collective economic power at the local level for specific communities.

There may be some confusion or conceptual slippage between the notion of 'resources' and economic conversion factors, as many resources relevant to staying or migration capability are economic in nature. Here, it may be helpful to distinguish between the resources available to individuals or households and economic conditions beyond their direct ownership or control. Economic conversion factors describe the latter: external economic conditions (related to community, state, or markets) that influence whether and how individuals and households are able to convert the resources at their disposal into achieving the lives they have reason to value.

Cultural factors describe the norms, meanings, beliefs, and collective identities that shape whether resources translate into staying capability. These conversion factors can work in both directions; they can bolster staying capability even where material conditions are modest or erode it even where material conditions are adequate. They are distinct from personal conversion factors because they refer to norms, meanings, beliefs, or visions of the good that are collectively held. They are thus part of the 'social imaginary' of a society – the web of conscious and unconscious assumptions about how things are and how things ought to be that shape individual aspirations and behavior (Schewel 2025; cf. Taylor 2002). Mata-Codesal (2015) describes this as the 'local sociocultural logics' that infuse mobility and immobility with specific meanings.

Factors that strengthen staying capability include shared place attachment and place-based identities, which make the act of staying intrinsically valuable. Zickgraf's (2021) research among Senegalese fishing communities offers one vivid illustration. Despite facing declining fish stocks and coastal erosion, respondents expressed strong place attachment. When asked why he did not establish a permanent home in Mauritania where he spent most of each year, one fisherman exclaimed, 'Because I am Guet Ndarian! I am Senegalese! My home is here!' (Zickgraf 2021, 9). Religious ties to ancestral burial grounds functioned similarly as an important retain factor; one elderly woman declared, 'Let [the sea] come! I was born here and I will die here' (9). These cultural meanings converted the notion of home into something worth enduring hardship to maintain.

Moral framings can operate in similar ways. In the Wyngaarden et al. (2022) example cited above, Honduran youth who constructed staying in terms of dignity and loyalty to homeland converted limited material resources into subjectively adequate foundations for remaining. Robins (2022a, 2022b), studying middle- to upper-middle-class stayers in São Paulo, found that despite having the capability to migrate, his respondents' choice to stay was motivated by belonging and duty to family, and by social imaginaries of country and nation. Drawing on Hirschman's (1970) *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* framework, Robins proposes the category of 'active immobility' to capture these conscious, culturally informed decisions to stay – offering insight, in the language used here, into the cultural conversion factors that shape loyalty to place.

Cultural factors can also erode staying capability. Where migration is normatively valued as a rite of passage or marker of success, cultural meanings may prevent resources from converting into staying capability regardless of their material adequacy. Van Praag (2021), for example, documents how, in the context of a culture of migration and environmental change, younger Moroccans expressed stronger migration aspirations tied to rising expectations that local economic opportunities could not satisfy. In such contexts, staying capability erodes not so much because material conditions have deteriorated but because the social imaginary has shifted ideas about a good life (see also Mata-Codesal 2015). Van Praag also shows how gendered norms can erode both staying and migration capability simultaneously: Moroccan women faced constraints on mobility that limited their capability to migrate and restrictions on the scope of their work that limited their capability to stay well in place, resulting in higher rates of involuntary immobility.

Environmental Conversion Factors

Environmental conversion factors refer to the physical and built environment that determines a location's livability. These factors shape whether locally available resources can sustain well-being in place, and they are subject to both gradual transformation and acute disruption.

Climate change is perhaps the most widely studied environmental conversion factor in current migration research, as it alters the biophysical conditions under which resources can sustain well-being in place. Across research sites examined in scholarship on environmental change and (im)mobility, changing precipitation patterns, coastal erosion, soil salinization, and increased frequency of extreme weather events erode the capability to stay by undermining the ecological foundations of local livelihoods (see Black et al. 2011a, Hermans & McLeman 2021; Mallick et al. 2020, Transiskus and Bazarbash 2024).

Other human-induced environmental changes operate similarly. The Veracruz case discussed in Section 2.2 illustrates how industrial development contaminated the local water table, undermining the environmental conditions necessary for remaining healthy in place. Zickgraf (2019) documents how industrial overfishing by foreign trawlers off Senegal's coast degraded the marine ecosystem on which fishermen's livelihoods depended, necessitating that they travel further in search of fish. Long-standing environmental justice scholarship uncovers a systemic pattern in such degradation. For example, Bullard (1990), in his classic *Dumping in Dixie* showed that marginalized communities, particularly African American communities in the Southern United States, are disproportionately targeted for the placement of toxic waste facilities and polluting industries. In all these cases, environmental change erodes staying capability – though it would be a mistake to assume a direct relationship between the erosion of staying capability and out-migration, as immobility often persists even where environmental conditions deteriorate significantly (see McLeman 2013; Schewel et al. 2024; Boas et al. 2025).

Yet environmental conditions are not only subject to degradation; they can also be maintained or rebuilt. As Adger (2006) argues, 'the concept of a social-ecological system reflects the idea that human action and social structures are integral to nature and hence any distinction between social and natural systems is arbitrary' (258). He advances a definition of vulnerability that links susceptibility to harm from exposure to environmental and social stress with the absence of the 'capacity to adapt'. A focus on adaptation suggests that human modifications to the environment can, when successful, reduce vulnerability and thus enhance staying capability. Irrigation systems, flood control infrastructure, land restoration, and marine protected areas represent attempts to maintain or rebuild the ecological conditions that make remaining viable and desirable.

More broadly, infrastructure development that impacts the built environment (e.g., roads, electricity, healthcare facilities, schools, water systems) can help ensure that locally available resources translate into capabilities for health, education, and economic participation. In one global assessment of the aspiration to stay in one's country, Debray et al. (2025) find that higher satisfaction with local amenities and infrastructure is a consistently powerful 'retain factor' strongly associated with the aspiration to stay.

4 Toward Research and Policy Integration

The preceding sections argued that the capability to stay is analytically distinct from (not simply the inverse of) the capability to migrate, and that attending to both capabilities yields a richer account of mobility freedom and unfreedom. I proposed an approach to analyzing the conditions in which migration decisions are made based on four distinct configurations of migration and staying capability and reviewed how attention to conversion factors can support theoretical and empirical research on the determinants of staying capability. This section turns to questions of application from two perspectives. First, how does the capability to stay connect to emerging normative discourses focused on the right to stay, and second, how might researchers operationalize the concept empirically?

4.1 Connections to the Right to Stay

The capability to stay resonates with growing legal and political claims to place. The 'right to stay' has been articulated by communities facing climate displacement, development-induced relocation, urban dispossession, or to justify amnesty for immigrants with strong belonging claims (see Carens 2010; Bacon 2013; Iyer & Schewel 2024; Düvell 2025). While no explicit right to stay exists in international law, legal scholars argue it is implicit in a constellation of existing protections: freedom of movement (which implies a right not to move), the right to adequate housing, and the rights of Indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands, for example (see Iyer & Schewel 2024 for a review). A parallel discourse on 'the right to the city,' originating with Lefebvre (1967) makes analogous claims about urban residents' entitlements not only to remain in place but to participate in and shape the places they inhabit (see Domaradzka 2018).

These normative frameworks encompass both negative and positive dimensions of liberty (cf. de Haas 2021). As claims to negative liberty, they function as protections against forced eviction, arbitrary displacement, or dispossession by market forces or state action. As claims to positive liberty, they assert entitlements to live well (and ideally flourish) in place – to build livelihoods, exercise voice, and participate in shaping one's community. The capability to stay offers an analytical counterpart to these normative claims. It provides a conceptual approach for assessing whether the substantive conditions

for living well in place are present. After all, a person may possess the legal right to stay yet lack the capability to do so if their environment has degraded, their livelihood has collapsed, or their participation in community life is foreclosed.

This normative and discursive power of the terms the right to stay and the capability to stay are themselves sufficient to lend utility to these concepts. Integrating the capability to stay into the aspiration-capability framework gives scholars and advocates language to articulate what is at stake when the forces of displacement gain strength, and to identify where the conditions for remaining have eroded. In this way, the concept's discursive power makes visible a dimension of mobility freedom that migration capability alone cannot capture. However, the capability approach is not only a normative framework. From its beginnings, it aspired to be evaluative. Sen proposed it as a better framework to assess well-being and deprivation than typical development metrics. If the capability to stay is to inform research and policy, it should ideally be amenable to some form of assessment. How, then, might researchers approach this concept empirically?

4.2 Operationalizing the Capability to Stay

The capability to stay presents a distinct operationalization challenge. The capability to migrate is at least partially revealed when someone successfully navigates a migration process, but the capability to stay has no equivalent behavioral marker. The functioning of staying – the observation that someone has *not* migrated – tells us almost nothing about whether that person possesses the substantive freedom to live well where they are. Staying may reflect deep place attachment, resigned acceptance, or severe constraints. Given this potential gap between observed behavior and capability, what strategies are available for assessing the capability to stay, and what are their limits? The broader capability approach literature has grappled with versions of this problem across domains, and the strategies researchers have developed offer useful entry points – each representing a different position on the relationship between observable outcomes and underlying freedoms.

A first approach constructs *evaluative indices to assess capability at scale.* The Human Development Index, developed by Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen, was the pioneering attempt – ranking countries by health, education, and living standards rather than income alone and demonstrating that economic growth does not automatically translate into well-being (UNDP 1990). The Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission (2009) extended this logic, arguing that well-being is too multidimensional for any single number and recommending a 'dashboard' of indicators spanning material conditions, health, education, political voice, social connections, and environmental quality.

Applied to the capability to stay, researchers might construct indices aggregating factors hypothesized to support staying capability – environmental stability, local employment opportunities, housing security, social infrastructure – relying on achieved functionings to measure these. This approach parallels emerging efforts to measure migration capability at scale (see Rodríguez-Peña 2025; Bekaert et al. 2026; Carling and Schewel 2018).[8] Such indices could enable cross-regional or cross-national

[8] Rodríguez-Peña (2025) makes the first attempt at the global operationalization of migration capability, constructing a country-level index from four forms of capital: economic (net personal wealth), social (emigration rates and remittances), human (school enrollment), and citizenship (entry, settlement, and exit freedoms). Testing different weightings, she finds that emphasizing economic and citizenship capital best captures patterns of involuntary immobility. She acknowledges key limitations of this approach, notably that the index cannot account

comparison. However, it will be important to heed the empirical evidence that standard development indicators – rising educational attainment, higher incomes – often correlate with rising migration desires and out-migration. Enhanced resources will not translate into enhanced staying capability if the opportunities to use those resources locally are absent.

A second approach is *participatory and community-engaged*. A persistent limitation of evaluative indices is that they measure what experts or policymakers deem important rather than what communities themselves identify as conditions for flourishing. Alkire (2002) addressed this by deriving relevant capability dimensions for multidimensional poverty assessments from participatory processes. Consultations in El Salvador, for example, revealed that violence and lack of leisure time were central to the experience of poverty – dimensions absent from standard global indices. In Bhutan, the Gross National Happiness Index famously incorporates psychological well-being, cultural diversity, and ecological health, reflecting a normative framework that reflects the non-materialist values of that society (Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative, n.d.; Alkire et al. 2012).

Applied to the capability to stay, participatory methods would ask what conditions local residents identify as necessary for flourishing in place. This avoids the potential for paternalism in top-down assessments and gives priority to communities defining for themselves what the capability to stay requires in their context. From this vantage point, it becomes easier to assess what resources, rights, and conversion factors are most relevant for a given population in a given place at a given time. The limitation is that findings are context-specific and may not generalize, but the strength is also precisely that specificity.

Third, the capability to stay can function as *an interpretive lens within qualitative and mixed-methods research* – a way of asking questions and organizing analysis rather than a tool for measurement or evaluation. Qualitative approaches within the capabilities approach tradition put a strong emphasis on agency and perceived opportunity, allowing researchers to distinguish between those who choose a particular path and those who never saw that path as genuinely available (see Robeyns 2003; Walker & Unterhalter 2007). Ethnographic and interview-based studies can explore the kinds of lives people value, how they perceive their options, what they experience as constraints, and how different conversion factors shape what feels possible where they are. This approach is particularly powerful for capturing the subjective dimensions that using functionings as proxies for capabilities misses.

Within qualitative and community-engaged approaches, one promising research strategy is to focus on individuals and communities who are actively striving to stay – those who aspire to stay and are working to make that viable. This focus makes the capability to stay more empirically tractable. Recent work from Tinoco (2023) examines the aspiration and capability to stay among California residents after their homes were devastated by wildfire, distinguishing between the capability to return post-disaster and the capabilities required to cultivate preparedness for future hazards. Work by Farbotko (2018, 2022) highlights the place commitment of indigenous communities in the Pacific Islands and the political work required to advocate for their right to stay, including contesting external claims that their islands will become uninhabitable. Focusing on communities actively striving to stay may surface capabilities that do not map onto conventional development thinking. If the capabilities required for staying well differ from those that facilitate exit, this has implications for how we think about development in place

for variation across specific migration corridors or within-country inequality. She identifies the capability to stay as one of three priority directions for future research.

– suggesting strategies oriented toward flourishing where people are, rather than strategies that inadvertently expand only the capabilities that require leaving.

Finally, the broader capabilities approach literature also suggests *an essentialist approach* that would aim to clarify the universal capabilities required to achieve well-being in place. Following Nussbaum's (2000, 2011) proposal of ten central human capabilities grounded in a universal conception of human dignity, researchers or policymakers could define baseline capabilities necessary for a dignified life in any location – environmental security, adequate livelihood, access to healthcare, political voice, freedom from violence (or indeed, Nussbaum's original ten). The spatial boundaries of 'place' would vary by research question or policy relevance. Within this approach, if these conditions are met, one might claim that the capability to stay is present, regardless of whether individuals choose to stay or leave. This approach connects most directly to the normative discourse on the right to stay discussed in Section 4.1: specifying baseline capabilities for staying well in place provides analytical content to rights claims that might otherwise remain abstract. Its limitation is the familiar one: it risks imposing external definitions of what matters for flourishing in place. Any specification would need to heed Nussbaum's counsel that such lists remain specific enough to guide policy but vague enough to accommodate cultural variation.

4.3 Links between Migration and Staying Capabilities

There is a risk, in theorizing the capability to stay as a distinct concept, that it appears analytically separate from migration dynamics – as if staying and migrating capabilities operate in parallel domains. Miyai (2026), for example, argues that the two stand in fundamental and irreconcilable tension: expanding individual capabilities through migration necessarily undermines collective capabilities in origin communities, creating what he terms a 'migration-development dilemma'. This is not the argument I wish to make. The capability to stay and the capability to migrate are often interrelated, and in some contexts, migration may be a mechanism through which staying capability is built, maintained, or restored. In many contexts, people leave precisely in order to stay: migration serves as a strategy for accumulating the resources, security, or social position that make long-term rootedness viable (see also Zickgraf 2019).

This interrelation operates across multiple scales and temporal frames. At the individual level, migration may function as a strategy to enhance staying capability over the long term. During my research in Wayisso, Ethiopia, I found international labor migration – particularly women's migration to the Middle East for domestic work – often served precisely this purpose. Young women migrated not to settle abroad permanently but to accumulate the capital necessary to finance a move to town, purchase a home, and establish a small business. Migration was a short-term disruption in service of long-term settlement in town: a way of converting temporary mobility into sustainable staying capability in an urban setting of the same district (see Schewel 2022). This was a total inversion of the more typical 'step-wise migration' described in migration literature (see Paul 2011).

At the household level, individual migration can support the collective staying capability of those who remain. This dynamic is central to the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM), which conceptualizes migration as a household-level strategy for managing risk and diversifying income (Stark & Bloom 1985), and to the growing literature on 'migration as adaptation' to environmental change (Black et al. 2011b, see also Zickgraf 2019). Remittances enable households to weather shocks, invest in agriculture or housing, and maintain viable livelihoods in place. In Wayisso, I found this logic extended beyond the nuclear household to broader kin networks: migration decisions were embedded

in multigenerational strategies for collective flourishing, with younger migrants supporting not only parents and siblings but also cousins, aunts, and aging relatives whose staying capability depended on resources flowing back from cities or abroad (Schewel 2025).

At the regional level, the relationship between migration and staying capabilities unfolds over longer time horizons. In research on the mobility transition in the mid-20th century in Bolsward, the Netherlands, Wielstra (2020) found that out-migration initially rose as a response to gaps between changing life aspirations and local opportunities as this rural region industrialized. Yet he argues that as local opportunities expanded over the decades – through economic diversification, infrastructure development, rising wages, and stronger social welfare programs – the gap between life aspirations and local opportunities decreased, out-migration declined, and voluntary immobility increased (Wielstra 2020; see also Schewel et al. 2025).

The Chitwan Valley in Nepal illustrates a contrasting trajectory. In that study, researchers examined whether local development in the valley, particularly providing modern facilities and services closer to rural people's homes, reduces migration (Massey et al. 2010). The authors find that, in the short term, there were clear negative effects on out-migration: 'more banks, buses, employers, markets, and government programs in the community increase local employment and earnings opportunities to reduce the odds of migration' (31). In other words, the growth of these local amenities appeared to enhance the capability to stay. However, they also found that, over the long term, growing up in a community with more social and economic resources *increased* the odds of leaving. They argue, 'in such a setting, one's parents have more opportunities to earn money and finance human capital formation, and individuals have access to more resources to invest in their own human capital' (31). For rural youth, investing in one's 'human capital' usually means leaving. Over time, the aspirations of young people and their parents may have shifted such that local opportunities were no longer adequate to achieve their vision of a good life – a dynamic that resonates with what Thornton et al. (2022) describe as an 'developmental idealism' that takes hold.

Thus, the capability to stay is a dynamic concept, as the lives we 'have reason to value' change across the life course and from one generation to the next as societies transform. Social imaginaries change and cultural conversion factors shift. These examples underscore that the capability to stay should not be assessed in isolation from migration dynamics, nor from a direct examination of the broader life aspirations individuals and communities hold.

5 Conclusion

The stories we tell about why people migrate, and how development or climate change impacts people's aspirations and capabilities, shape how academics, practitioners, and policymakers respond to global migration. This paper has argued that the aspiration-capability framework – now widely influential in migration studies – requires a more fundamental revision if it is to capture the full spectrum of mobility and immobility outcomes. Integrating the capability to stay into the aspiration-capability framework enables it to explain mobility outcomes across the forced-to-voluntary spectrum. It also provides richer language to connect migration and immobility dynamics to questions of development, freedom, and human rights, linking the framework more directly to research on forced displacement and environmental change.

A core argument of this paper is that the capability to stay and the capability to migrate are not simple inverses of each other. They require different configurations of resources and conversion factors, and

the same process of social transformation (or 'development') can expand one while eroding the other. The economic changes that might enhance migration capability – rising education, economic growth, infrastructure development, etc. – may simultaneously undermine staying capability by dismantling local livelihoods, degrading environments, or reshaping aspirations in ways that render local opportunities inadequate. This asymmetry has consequences for how we interpret migration flows and their 'developmental', environmental, or other determinants.

The significance of this asymmetry was explored in Section 2, which illustrated through contrasting case studies that the same broad pattern – rising emigration alongside rising development indicators – can reflect expanding freedoms or collapsing ones. In Morocco, de Haas documented how development expanded aspirations and capabilities to migrate as part of a broader expansion of capabilities; in Veracruz, Bacon argued development as trade liberalization and foreign investment dismantled local livelihoods and degraded environments, driving migration through the erosion of the capability to stay. The Ethiopian case revealed both dynamics operating simultaneously within the same rural community. Without the capability to stay as an analytical counterpart, the aspiration-capability framework defaults to the first interpretation – development expands capabilities to migrate – and risks obscuring the second, in which development erodes the conditions for staying well in place. The policy implications diverge in important ways: one reading suggests migration is a sign of expanding freedom; the other directs attention to what is being lost.

Further, I argued that the capability to migrate and the capability to stay cannot be measured in the same way. The functioning of migration reveals some degree of migration capability; the functioning of staying does not reveal staying capability. This points to some conceptual tensions that remain unsettled and deserve acknowledgment. 'Staying' is an imperfect term. What I have circled around throughout this paper is better captured as the capability to stay and live well in place – or even, one might say, the capability to stay and progress in place. I use the simplified term 'capability to stay' for its parsimony and its integration with the existing aspiration-capability vocabulary, but the concept points toward something much richer than spatial fixity.

The conversion factors framework offers one productive entry point for empirical research on the capability to stay: analyzing how personal, social, and environmental conditions shape whether resources translate into well-being in place reveals the mechanisms through which staying capability is built or eroded in specific contexts. Section 4 explored several additional strategies, from evaluative indices that enable cross-regional comparison, to participatory methods that allow communities to define the conditions for flourishing in place, to qualitative approaches that treat the capability to stay as an interpretive lens for organizing analysis of (im)mobility processes. Each approach involves trade-offs between generalizability and contextual depth, and the right strategy depends on the research question and scale of analysis. Important challenges remain. The capability to stay is dynamic – what people value and what place can provide shift across the life course and across generations as societies transform. Further, as Section 4.3 illustrated, migration and staying capabilities are often interrelated: migration can serve as a mechanism through which staying capability is built, maintained, or restored, complicating any simple zero-sum framing. Empirical work on the capability to stay will need to grapple with this dynamism and interdependence rather than treating staying capability as a fixed property of persons or places.

Advancing a research agenda on immobility using the lens of the capability to stay also contributes to broader capability approach scholarship. The capability approach has long recognized that capabilities are shaped by context, but it rarely foregrounds the spatial specificity of that context – the fact that capabilities are realized in particular places, and that the conditions enabling well-being in one place

may not transfer to another. The capability to stay makes this spatial embeddedness analytically central, raising questions about how place-specific capabilities relate to more portable freedoms and how we evaluate well-being for populations whose relationship to place is precarious or provisional. The typology developed in Section 3 centers this spatial dimension: crossing migration and staying capabilities generates four configurations – Mobility Freedom, Displacement Exposure, Constrained Well-being, and Compounded Vulnerability – that characterize the conditions within which migration decisions are made. Without staying capability in view, the framework cannot distinguish between migration that reflects genuine choice and migration shaped by the erosion of well-being in place, nor between immobility that reflects place-based flourishing and immobility that reflects compounded deprivation.

This paper has focused primarily on the capability side of the aspiration-capability framework. The aspiration side – how aspirations to stay form, shift, adapt, or interact with staying capabilities – deserves fuller treatment than this paper can provide. A substantial and growing body of research on migration aspirations offers rich resources for this work (e.g., Carling & Collins 2018; Czaika & Reinprecht 2022; Aslany et al. 2021). Much of it resonates with, or could be productively reframed through, attention to the relationship between aspirations and capabilities to stay. The cases and conversion factors analysis throughout the paper touch on how social norms, shifting visions of a good life, and the capacity to envision local futures shape aspirations and capabilities to stay – dynamics that warrant sustained theoretical and empirical attention.

Finally, a word on the normative stakes. Calls to enable people to stay in place are often criticized for giving implicit support to initiatives to decrease migration, to migration controls, and to immigration regimes that deprive people of the right to movement. This concern echoes Malkki's (1992) influential critique of the 'sedentarist' assumptions embedded in both nationalist discourse and social science, which naturalize rootedness and treat mobility as pathological. The concept of the capability to stay is different. When a focus on staying attends only to outcomes and implicitly frames migration as a problem, it produces superficial measures that restrict rather than enhance well-being. Enhancing the capability to stay does not require diminishing migration; it requires expanding the conditions within which people can genuinely choose to move or to stay (Iyer & Schewel 2024). From this vantage point, all people should have the capability to stay, recognizing that many who possess it will still choose to migrate – and that choice reflects genuine mobility freedom.

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