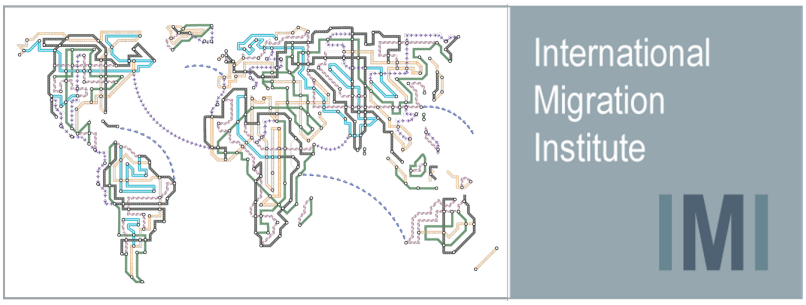


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From Involuntary Immobility to Mobility Struggles:

Aspirational and Behavioural Pathways under Mobility Constraints

Josef Neubauer, Naiara Rodríguez-Peña, Lea Müller-Funk, Sorana Toma, & Mathias Czaika



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Abstract

A substantial share of the global population aspires to migrate but remains unable to do so – a condition described as involuntary immobility. Existing research has primarily identified the drivers of this phenomenon, leaving underexplored how people live through and adapt to experiences of immobility, and how their migration aspirations evolve over time. This paper advances a longitudinal perspective on involuntary immobility. It introduces the concept of the *mobility struggle* to theorise how individuals transform their aspirations and efforts to migrate after experiencing a perceived or revealed inability to move. Drawing on existing scholarship and original interviews with individuals from El Salvador, Nepal, Senegal, and Syria, we distinguish three ideal-typical pathways that may follow experiences of involuntary immobility: persistence, reconsideration, and disengagement from migration. We argue that these pathways are rarely linear or mutually exclusive. Rather, the mobility struggle is often a recursive process in which individuals repeatedly experience involuntary immobility and reconfigure their aspirations and efforts over time. Integrating insights from migration studies, psychology, and our own empirical material, we examine mechanisms across four domains that shape how individuals make sense of and respond to involuntary immobility: motivation, alternatives, and capabilities; attributional style and social norms; interpersonal relationships; and life-course dynamics and critical events. By highlighting the temporal and processual nature of involuntary immobility, this article offers a dynamic framework for how migration aspirations are sustained, modified, or abandoned, and concludes with directions for further research on involuntary immobility and its consequences.

Keywords: involuntary immobility, mobility struggle, migration aspirations, migration attempts, temporality, adaptation

Authors: Josef Neubauer (University for Continuing Education Krems), Naiara Rodríguez-Peña (University of Deusto & University for Continuing Education Krems), Lea Müller-Funk (University for Continuing Education Krems), Sorana Toma (Ghent University), Mathias Czaika (University for Continuing Education Krems)

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1 Introduction

Migration studies has long suffered from a foundational bias: it overwhelmingly focuses on those who migrate (Schewel 2020), while immobility has been treated as a residual category of little analytical significance. Over the past two decades, this has begun to change. Researchers have increasingly examined those who wish to stay (Mata-Codesal 2018), as well as aspiring migrants for whom migration does not materialise (Carling 2002; Gaibazzi 2015). Within this emerging body of work, involuntary immobility – the condition where individuals desire to migrate but lack the means to do so (Carling & Schewel 2018) – has emerged as a crucial concept.

The scale of the phenomenon is striking. While only 3.7 per cent of the world population were international migrants in 2024 (McAuliffe & Ceriani Cernadas 2026), approximately 15 per cent aspired to move to another country (Gallup 2026). Among sub-Saharan Africans, the contrast is even sharper: about 3 per cent lived abroad, compared with more than one-third who wished to do so. This gap – between the aspiration to migrate and the ability to realise it – is not incidental. The combination of globalisation processes, restrictive immigration regimes, high migration costs, widening socio-economic inequalities, environmental hazards, and violent conflict has produced what Kleist and Thorsen (2016) call a 'mobility paradox': an era characterised simultaneously by an unprecedented global reach and circulation of communication, media, and transport infrastructure *and* by widespread involuntary immobility. Structural mobility constraints disproportionately affect young people in low- and middle-income countries, for whom migration is often imagined as a key route to adulthood, security, or social mobility, yet remains persistently out of reach (Vanden Hautte et al. 2025). Crucially, this is not just a matter of international but also internal mobility: many people struggle to realise domestic migration aspirations due to limited resources, inaccessible housing or land, dangerous travel routes, restrictive social norms, relational responsibilities, or lacking family support. Widespread involuntary immobility thus complicates dominant framings of the present as an 'Age of Migration' (see de Haas et al. 2020): for many people around the globe, it is an age of blocked mobility and frustrated aspirations to move.

What, then, is it like to *experience* involuntary immobility, both in the moment and over time? A growing body of literature documents how unfulfilled migration aspirations shape well-being, economic activity, career trajectories, intimate relationships, social life, and political participation, but offers divergent and sometimes contradictory answers (Andersson & Siegel 2019; Asayesh & Kazemipur 2024). Many ethnographic studies focus on the harmful consequences of prolonged involuntary immobility: Conrad Suso (2020) captures young Gambian men retreating from social and economic life in a state of hopelessness locally referred to as 'nerves syndrome', while Jónsson (2008) describes Soninke youth in Mali as a 'generation-in-waiting', stalled at the threshold of an adulthood that migration was expected to secure. These accounts suggest that involuntary immobility can trap people in cycles of low or unattainable aspirations, frustration and despair, and disengagement from social life – an analogue to 'aspirations failure' or 'traps' identified in development economics (Genicot & Ray 2017; La Ferrara 2019; Ray 2006). Yet some other studies paint a different picture. Some aspiring international migrants remain actively engaged in local life across economic, social, and political spheres despite constrained mobility (Carling et al. 2024), redirect their aspirations towards internal migration (Ortiga & Macabasag 2021b), or draw on networks, digital resources and negotiation strategies to eventually realise mobility (Liu & Peng 2024; Rodríguez-Peña 2023). Empirically, these diverging accounts need not be mutually exclusive. Analytically, however, they remain poorly integrated: a conceptual framework capable of capturing and theorising diverse experiences of involuntary immobility remains missing.

We argue that this fragmentation stems from a deeper theoretical problem: involuntary immobility is typically approached as a state rather than a process. Much of what we know captures experiences of immobility at discrete moments in time, offering snapshots rather than trajectories. As a result, we have a limited understanding of how individuals navigate involuntary immobility: how aspirations and behaviours shift in response to sustained constraint, and what determines whether someone persists in their migration ambitions, reconsiders them, or disengages from them altogether. This temporal blind spot is consequential. What drives, enables, and blocks migration evolves, not least through the very changes in aspirations and cognitive and behavioural efforts that immobility encourages or forecloses. Any robust theory of involuntary immobility must therefore adopt a temporal perspective.

This paper builds the foundation for such a theory. Drawing on findings from migration research, our own data, and psychological theories on goal pursuit, we propose a processual framework that recasts involuntary immobility as a *mobility struggle*. This conceptual redefinition from a state to a process allows us to capture the aspirational and behavioural pathways that follow individual *experiences* of involuntary immobility – moments in which individuals conclude they cannot realise their migration aspirations or fail in an attempt to do so. We argue that the diverse ways in which people navigate involuntary immobility are captured by three ideal-typical pathways: *persistence*, in which migration aspirations and cognitive and behavioural efforts are maintained, intensified, or adapted; *reconsideration*, in which migration aspirations are questioned and chances for their realisation reassessed; and *disengagement*, in which migration aspirations and efforts are abandoned, often followed by a reorientation towards a life in place. These pathways should not be understood as linear processes. Rather, individuals may move fluidly between them as circumstances, motivations, and self-assessments change. We further link the mobility struggle to what we call the *immobility struggle* – the process in which individuals attempt to build meaningful lives in place under challenging circumstances, sometimes after disengaging from migration efforts.

The mobility struggle framework and its pathways are grounded in a large corpus of qualitative interviews pooled across five recent research projects on migration and immobility. The projects cover contexts across the globe where mobility is constrained and involuntary immobility a common phenomenon – whether at places of origin, at destinations, or in transit. DYNAMIGS carried out 60 interviews with young Nepalis in three regions of Nepal and 30 with Nepalis residing in Lisbon to understand how migration aspirations change over time; MOVES supported the analysis of 17 interviews with migrants from different Latin American countries living in the Netherlands, who had previously experienced involuntary immobility; PATHWAYS and the preceding VLIR-UOS Global Minds project (in the framework of Alix Debray's PhD project) collected a total of 74 interviews to understand involuntary immobility among young Senegalese in the Casamance region; and SYREALITY conducted 100 interviews with Syrians in four European capitals and additionally drew on 20 previously collected interviews with people who had stayed or been displaced inside Syria. Though sampling methods and criteria varied between projects, all sought to recruit a diverse range of participants, spanning different age groups, genders, and socio-economic backgrounds. Our combined sample includes participants who had experienced involuntary immobility in the past, and others who were still preparing or trying to move at the time of the interview. The mobility struggle framework advanced in this paper captures the three major pathways we identified across these heterogeneous cases of involuntary immobility. We present illustrative cases to demonstrate dominant manifestations of each pathway and uncover some of the key mechanisms shaping them.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first propose the mobility struggle as a framework to conceptually and empirically capture involuntary immobility over time. Next, we synthesise insights from migration scholarship with broader literature from the social sciences and psychology to develop a theoretical repertoire for understanding why mobility struggles unfold differently. We then examine the mobility

struggle in greater detail by illustrating dominant manifestations of the three pathways using empirical examples from El Salvador, Nepal, Senegal and Syria. We conclude by outlining directions for future research on involuntary immobility.

2 Rethinking involuntary immobility through mobility struggles

The theoretical idea behind involuntary immobility is straightforward: individuals desire to migrate but are unable to do so (Carling 2002). Empirically, however, this proposition is surprisingly difficult to operationalise. Some individuals encounter barriers they see as insurmountable or perceive risks they are unwilling to accept. Others attempt and fail to migrate but have not yet exhausted all possible options. To determine at which point an individual is *truly unable* to realise their migration aspirations is therefore a challenging if not impossible task. Matters grow more complex once we adopt a temporal perspective: aspirations, opportunities, barriers, and (perceived) abilities to move constantly change. We are thus left with two issues. First, involuntary immobility is hard to nail down ontologically and assess empirically. Second, even if we succeed, we capture it only as a snapshot, a static condition at a given moment in time, missing the transitions and negotiations unfolding between them.

We propose two conceptual moves to address these challenges. First, we introduce *experiences of involuntary immobility* as empirically identifiable manifestations of involuntary immobility at specific moments in time. Second, we take these experiences as the starting point – and often recurring event – of what we call *mobility struggles*: the pathways through which people continuously maintain and adapt their aspirations and efforts to navigate challenges in their pursuit of migration.

We define experiences of involuntary immobility as moments in which individuals either (1) conclude that they cannot realise a specific migration aspiration *(perceived inability*), or (2) fail in an actual attempt to do so (*revealed inability*). For instance, a young man aspiring to study abroad may gather information about good foreign degree programmes, universities, and visa requirements, but ultimately conclude that the barriers are insurmountable, at least for now (perceived inability); alternatively, he may apply and be rejected by a university or embassy (revealed inability; see also Caso & Toma 2026). The case illustrates the inherently relative and contingent character of involuntary immobility: the inability to realise not migration in general, but *specific migration scenarios* considered desirable and acceptable – limited to particular purposes, routes, destinations, timings or sets of conditions. In most cases, migratory alternatives are available, albeit not always perceived as desirable: moving to a different location, region, or country, via alternative routes, or under different conditions. Only in rare circumstances, such as incarceration, do people face *absolute* involuntary immobility with no options to move whatsoever.

With experiences of involuntary immobility as our starting point, we can now turn to the notion of *mobility struggles*. We define mobility struggles as ongoing endeavours to move in the face of significant obstacles. Recasting involuntary immobility as a struggle for mobility shifts attention from states to processes, allowing us to conceptualise how people navigate, and sometimes re-encounter, experiences of involuntary immobility over time.

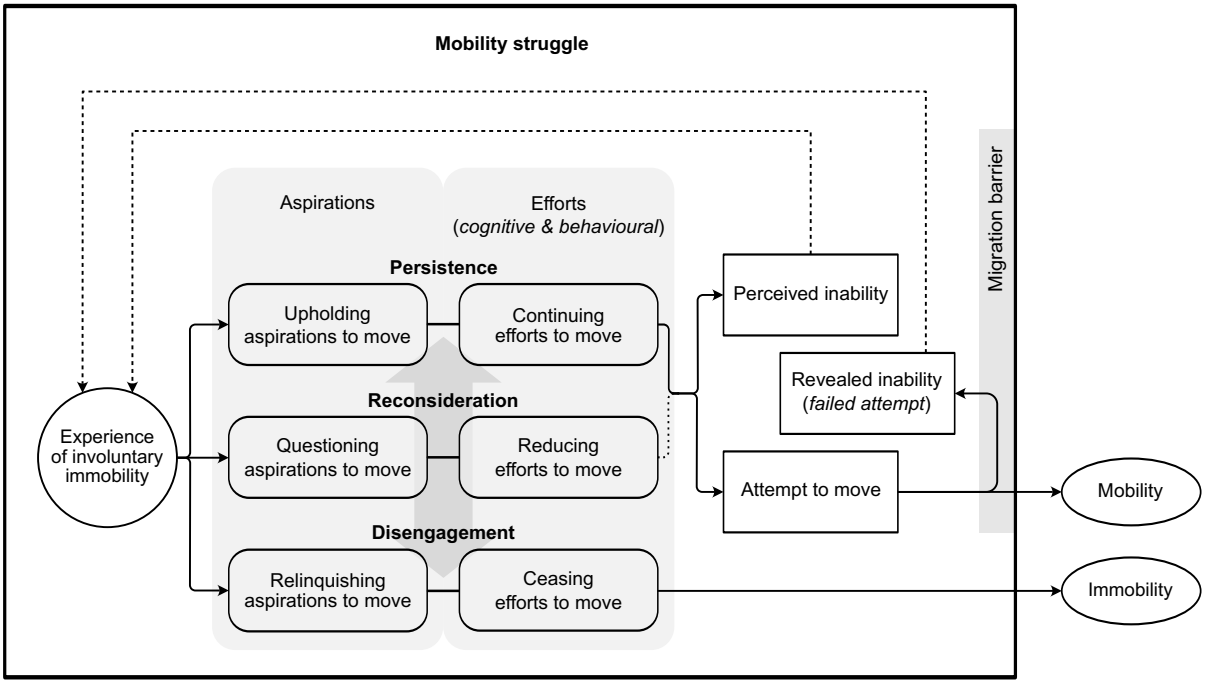
Our focus lies on how individuals reconfigure their *aspirations* and *efforts* – both cognitive and behavioural – towards migration. Research shows that there is no single or universal way in which people respond to experiences of involuntary immobility. Some actively resist constraints by repeating a migration attempt, devising new strategies, or seeking alternative routes (Liu & Peng 2024; Mainwaring 2016; Rodríguez-Peña 2023). Others attenuate and shift their migration aspirations and efforts, for instance towards more accessible internal or international destinations (Neubauer 2024;

Ortiga & Macabasag 2021b). Finally, some reorient towards local alternatives in order to avoid repeated disappointment (Ortiga & Macabasag 2021a).

Motivational psychology provides useful frameworks to conceptually capture these diverse responses to involuntary immobility. Historically focused on goal[1] commitment and persistence, the field has increasingly examined goal adjustment and disengagement as critical regulatory processes for well-being (Barlow et al. 2020; Brandstätter & Bernecker 2022; Kappes & Schattke 2022). *Goal adjustment theory*, for example, distinguishes five possible responses when goals are blocked: (1) persistent goal commitment, (2) adaptations of strategies to achieve the same goal, (3) scaling back a goal to a more attainable level, (4) goal disengagement followed by the formation of new goals, and (5) goal disengagement without reorientation towards new goals (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. 2003). Similarly, *dual-process theory* identifies two broad coping strategies in response to blocked goals: assimilative coping, which involves intensifying effort to realise an existing goal, and accommodative coping, which entails revising goals that are no longer attainable (Brandtstädter & Rothermund 2002). When setbacks are acute or experienced repeatedly, individuals may enter an *action crisis*: a severe decisional conflict between continuing the pursuit of an obstructed goal or disengaging from it (Brandstätter et al. 2013). This concept is particularly useful for understanding moments in mobility struggles when individuals reconsider migration as a whole, often triggering profound reflections and tensions around personal values, life paths, and identity, with significant consequences for psychological well-being.

Integrating these psychological concepts with findings from the migration literature and our own empirical data, we distinguish three ideal-typical pathways that may follow experiences of involuntary immobility across the aspirational and behavioural domains: persistence, reconsideration and disengagement. Figure 1 illustrates our conceptualisation of the mobility struggle and its pathways.

Figure 1. The mobility struggle



[1] Goals – defined as 'internal representations of desired states, where states are broadly construed as outcomes, events, or processes' (Austin & Vancouver 1996, 338) – lie at the heart of motivational research, and their conceptual proximity to aspirations in migration studies makes this literature particularly productive.

Persistence. First, individuals may persist in their struggle for mobility, by maintaining, adjusting, or deferring their aspirations or efforts. They may subsequently encounter another instance of involuntary immobility – concluding that their (adjusted) aspirations remain unattainable (*perceived inability*) or experiencing a further failed attempt (*revealed inability*). This, in turn, initiates a new iteration of the mobility struggle. Alternatively, they may succeed in moving and exit the struggle (*mobility*).

Reconsideration. Second, experiences of involuntary immobility may prompt individuals to seriously reconsider migration itself. In some cases, reconsideration can take the form of an action crisis, triggering a severe decisional conflict between persisting and giving up. Individuals in the reconsideration pathway often reduce their efforts to move or invest in both moving and staying simultaneously, and may eventually opt to fully re-engage with their pursuit of migration or to disengage.

Disengagement. Third, individuals may decide to disengage from the mobility struggle by accepting the infeasibility of their migration endeavours, whether following a longer reconsideration process or immediately after experiencing involuntary immobility. Following goal adjustment theory, we define disengagement as a process of withdrawing not only behavioural effort but also cognitive and emotional commitment to a goal. This process is often accompanied by a redirection of aspirations and efforts towards local alternatives (*immobility*).

We should note that all three pathways are adaptive processes, not one-off events. While aspirations are never static, they rarely change abruptly, and processing failed attempts to achieve them takes time (Brandstätter & Schüler 2013; Klinger 1975). Individuals often move across pathways and transition between them, with or without another experience of involuntary immobility. For instance, a person may initially decide to try again and prepare for the next opportunity, but gradually begin to disengage as time passes, circumstances change, or new opportunities arise. Conversely, someone beginning to disengage and reorient towards staying may encounter an attractive chance to move and decide to pursue it.

3 Explaining mobility struggles

Understanding how people respond to involuntary immobility across aspirational and behavioural domains requires drawing on multiple bodies of knowledge. Migration studies has documented how social structures constrain mobility and shape aspirations, while psychological research offers valuable concepts and insights into how individuals respond to blocked goals, make sense of failure, and adjust aspirations across the life course. Broader literature from the social sciences further adds to this by highlighting how the social environment, capabilities, and structural changes shape both aspirations and efforts to realise them. Rather than reviewing these literatures exhaustively, we bring them into dialogue as complementary perspectives to explain how mobility struggles unfold.

We organise this discussion around four interrelated dimensions of the experience of involuntary immobility: (1) how individuals respond when aspirations are blocked; (2) how they interpret and make sense of involuntary immobility; (3) how the immediate social environment shapes both aspirations and efforts towards mobility; and (4) how time and the life course structure the meaning, desirability, and urgency of mobility. Together, this integrated body of work provides the conceptual foundation for the mobility struggles framework developed above. It forms a theoretical repertoire to explain why different individuals – or the same individuals over time – experience and navigate involuntary immobility in diverse, often iterative and reversible ways.

3.1 Responding to blocked aspirations: commitment, alternatives, and capabilities

Whether individuals persist, reconsider, or disengage from migration when they experience involuntary immobility likely depends on their level of commitment and prior investments. The action phase model in motivational psychology suggests that once individuals commit to and begin pursuing a goal they cognitively shift from a deliberative mindset towards an implemental mindset to support goal pursuit and overcome obstacles (Gollwitzer et al. 1990; H. Heckhausen & Gollwitzer 1987). This shift reduces consideration of alternatives while increasing risk-taking and perceived desirability and feasibility of the goal (Gollwitzer 2012; Keller et al. 2020). Accordingly, individuals who have begun planning and acting towards migration may be more likely to persist when they experience involuntary immobility than those who conclude they cannot move at a more deliberative stage. Similarly, insights from the literature on sunk cost effects and escalating commitment in decision-making (Arkes & Blumer 1985; Brockner 1992) suggest that prior investments of time and resources in migration may discourage from disengagement, as individuals feel they have already invested too much to quit.

Another relevant strand of psychological literature highlights the role of goal configurations – that is, how goals and means relate to each other (Kruglanski et al. 2023). If migration is one of several viable means to achieve a broader life aspiration, disengaging is easier as individuals can turn to non-migration alternatives. Similarly, migration aspirations may conflict with other goals that require staying (Rodríguez-Peña 2024), generating ambivalence that makes individuals more likely to reconsider or disengage when obstacles arise. However, where migration exclusively carries the promise of attaining one or multiple core life aspirations, it may become so associated with these higher-order goals that migration becomes a core goal in its own right that is much harder to replace (Kruglanski et al. 2018; Woolley & Fishbach 2023) – mirroring what migration scholars call intrinsic migration aspirations (Carling 2014; de Haas 2021).

Social science perspectives complement these psychological accounts by situating goal adjustment within the concrete opportunity structures individuals face. Whether people can realistically adjust or disengage from their migration aspirations depends not only on cognitive and emotional flexibility but also on the perceived availability of viable alternatives – both migratory and local. Studies have already highlighted how policies can trigger 'substitution effects' by restricting or opening routes or visa categories, diverting migrants towards new destinations or legal channels, altering the timing of departure, or affecting the likelihood of return (de Haas et al. 2019). By the same logic, remaining in place becomes a meaningful and desirable option where conditions and opportunities exist that matter to people's goals, values, and ideas of the good life. For a person with strong educational aspirations, for example, there is little alternative to migration if local (good) schools or universities do not exist or are not accessible. This connects possibilities for moving and staying to the capability approach in development studies (Nussbaum 2000; Sen 1999), which foregrounds how resources and opportunity structures shape what goals people can pursue and which alternatives are realistically available. *Capabilities to move* to destinations one desires and *capabilities to stay* and pursue a meaningful life locally are therefore useful concepts to explain different responses to blocked migration goals as they reveal the range of options individuals can choose from and adapt to (de Haas 2021; Schewel 2026).

3.2 Making sense of involuntary immobility: attributional styles and social norms

How people interpret experiences of immobility shapes their preferences, emotions, and responses related to it. Differential psychology highlights the importance of attributional style for goal pursuit: the ways in which individuals explain the causes of failures, successes, and general outcomes in their

lives (Weiner 2010). Whether individuals attribute failures – like an unsuccessful migration attempt – to internal or external, stable or unstable, and controllable or uncontrollable causes affects the emotional experience and subsequent goal pursuit (Ledrich & Gana 2013; Weiner 2018). Aspiring migrants who attribute their involuntary immobility to changeable, controllable causes or unstable, external circumstances should thus exhibit greater resilience and remain more persistent and proactive in seeking alternatives to fulfil their goals, as the cause of failure is seen as within one's power to alter or temporary (Brun et al. 2021; Foll et al. 2006; Johnson et al. 2017). In contrast, when an inability to move is attributed to forces perceived as stable and entirely beyond one's control, disengagement from migration goals should often be faster and easier. Specifically, attributions to fixed internal deficiencies may give rise to low self-esteem and self-efficacy, passivity and emotional withdrawal, which can spill over to and constrain other life domains (cf. Boddez et al. 2022; Maier & Seligman 2016).

Social science research situates these attributional processes within the normative systems that give (im)mobility its social meaning. In contexts characterised by a 'culture of migration', mobility is a collectively valorised marker of adulthood, success, and social worth (Ali 2007; Mondain et al. 2013). Failure to migrate thus carries social significance beyond personal disillusionment. Drawing on relative deprivation and social comparison theory, migration scholars show how individuals evaluate themselves against peers who have successfully migrated (Stark & Taylor 1989), producing shame and stigma that can intensify the psychological burden of immobility (Conrad Suso 2020). Where personal attributions of failure align with social narratives that confirm them, the effects are mutually reinforcing: the psychological weight of internal, stable, and uncontrollable attributions (e.g. blaming one's character) intensifies when the surrounding environment validates them through criticism, stigma, or ridicule. Conversely, social contexts that accept diverse life trajectories can buffer individuals against the most harmful effects of unfulfilled migration aspirations.

3.3 Support, pressure, and inspiration: the role of family, kin, and relevant others

Experiences of involuntary immobility are further shaped, we suggest, by individuals' type of motivation and close social environment: are aspirations driven by autonomous desires, the wish to please others, or obligation? Self-determination theory distinguishes between autonomous motivation – pursuing a goal because it is personally interesting or meaningful – and controlled motivation – pursuing a goal to satisfy external expectations, avoid disapproval or fulfil obligations, usually in relation to family members, kin, or other close individuals (Ryan & Deci 2000). This motivational dimension likely shapes emotional and behavioural responses when migration projects face barriers. Individuals with strong autonomous motivation may feel a greater sense of ownership over their goals, increasing persistence and emotional resilience in the face of setbacks. By contrast, those with controlled motivation are more likely to fear disappointment and social judgement from close others, and may experience sharper internal conflicts about whether to keep pursuing migration or not (cf. Deci & Ryan 2000; Holding et al. 2017, 2021).

Relevant others shape motivation not only through encouragement, pressure, and expectations, but can also open up new aspirational horizons and windows by functioning as role models (Morgenroth et al. 2015; Ray 2006). Relatives or friends may embody alternative routes to a respected and meaningful life, inspiring individuals to take on new pathways they had previously ignored or dismissed. Experimental studies find that even exposure to films with narrative accounts of others navigating relatable circumstances can significantly and lastingly reshape aspirations (T. Bernard et al. 2026). Such counterexamples may be particularly consequential in contexts where migration is widely seen as the

only road to success, as they can offer doubtful individuals the social licence and confidence to question this dominant narrative and consider local alternatives.

Beyond influencing what people *want*, the immediate social environment also shapes what they can *do*. Family members may facilitate or hamper migration efforts through financial and network support, access to information, or control over departure decisions (de Haas & Fokkema 2010), but also condition the ability to disengage from migration and pursue local opportunities by the same means. Together, relevant others thus shape both *aspirations* and the *capabilities* to realise them, and can even become the very reason migration projects fail (Rodríguez-Peña 2023). At the affective level, they can provide vital support, helping individuals process experiences of involuntary immobility. At the same time, they may intensify distress by exacerbating feelings of shame, guilt, self-doubt, or motivational conflict through pressure, expectations, and obligations.

3.4 Time, transitions, and the life course: age, deadlines, and vital conjunctures

The experience and navigation of involuntary immobility is further shaped by life events, episodes, and the broader life course. The meaning and urgency of migration, its pursuit and obstruction depend on age, life circumstances, and timing (de Groot et al. 2011; Gardner 2009; Horowitz & Entwisle 2021). Developmental psychology shows that the evaluation and pursuit of goals shift when individuals near 'developmental deadlines', that is, the end of a time window within which particular goals should, must, or can only be achieved, as their purpose, desirability, or attainment opportunities shift markedly thereafter. As a deadline approaches, goal focus and striving intensify; once it has passed, individuals revise and adapt to compensate for unfulfilled goals (J. Heckhausen et al. 2001). Of course, such windows, deadlines, and timetables are often not materially but socially constituted: traditions, communities, institutions, and laws shape normative timetables and opportunity structures for what 'should' and can be achieved, and when, as captured by the notion of the 'social clock' (Neugarten et al. 1965; Zang & Kim 2025). Applied to migration, these insights help explain why migration aspirations can be held and pursued with particular urgency at certain life phases – such as transitions into adulthood, educational milestones, or family formation – but also be abandoned relatively quickly, once a specific threshold in the life course has been crossed (A. Bernard et al. 2014; Coulter 2013; Kley 2011).

Anthropological work complements this perspective through the notion of 'vital conjunctures': particular life moments where possible courses of action, alternative futures and identities open up; 'a socially structured zone of possibility that emerges around specific periods of potential transformation in a life or lives' (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871). These may coincide with common life-course transitions like educational milestones or entry into parenthood, but can also arise at personal or structural transformations and disruptions – a health crisis, career pivot, or spiritual awakening, formative encounters with new individuals, lifestyles, or cultures, or an economic crisis, natural disaster, or war. Of course, (non)migration decisions and experiences also produce such conjunctures, as individuals negotiate alternative spatial futures (Bjarnesen 2009). The lens of vital conjunctures thus extends life-course perspectives by integrating critical life events of different kinds that can significantly reshape migration aspirations and efforts under constraints, as individuals reconsider and (at times) pivot to new life trajectories.

Together, we suggest that these perspectives are essential to understand how individuals experience and navigate involuntary immobility over time, and how their aspirational and behavioural pathways differ from each other. They underscore the role of individual motivation and psychological characteristics, social norms and environments, biographical circumstances, and structural opportunities and transformations in shaping mobility struggles. In the ensuing section, we elaborate on the three

pathways of the mobility struggle in more detail. We discuss dominant empirical manifestations of persistence, reconsideration, and disengagement through examples from our research and highlight the key mechanisms that help explain them.

4 Mobility struggle pathways: manifestations and mechanisms

4.1 Persistence

Experiences of involuntary immobility are typically painful setbacks. Yet rather than abandoning their aspirations, many individuals persist in their efforts to move. Persistence is not uniform but takes multiple forms: individuals may try again, redirect their aspirations towards alternative destinations or routes, or wait for new opportunity to emerge. But across these variations, individuals remain committed to migration, even as specific parameters are revised. We identify three common manifestations of persistence: (1) maintaining aspirations and efforts, (2) adjusting aspirations and efforts, and (3) active waiting.

4.1.1 Doubling down: maintaining aspirations and efforts

Contrary to intuitive expectations, first experiences of involuntary immobility in our sample were often followed by an intensification – rather than abandonment – of migration aspirations and efforts. This pattern aligns with the psychological 'frustration effect', whereby early obstacles increase the perceived value of a goal and energise subsequent pursuit (Klinger 1975). To overcome barriers, individuals often invest additional resources and renew their attempts, a response described as *assimilative coping* and *tenacious goal pursuit* in dual-process theory (Brandtstädter & Renner 1990). As migration becomes more highly valued after failure, competing goals are deprioritised, concentrating attention and resources on the struggle for mobility (see Asayesh & Kazemipur 2024).

The trajectory of Janak, a 24-year-old from Kathmandu, Nepal, illustrates this dynamic. He had never seriously considered migration until a relative successfully moved to Poland. Suddenly, migration to Europe – widely associated in Nepal with economic opportunity, modernity, and social status (Neubauer 2024) – appeared attainable. While awaiting the outcome of his visa application, Janak began to imagine a future abroad and to identify as a prospective migrant. Although his application ultimately failed, his aspiration had solidified. In the interview, he recalls:

> 'At that time, I had already made up my mind that I would not stay in Nepal. … I wanted to go abroad, no matter how.'

Over the following four years, Janak made repeated attempts to reach Europe, applying for different visa types across several countries. Rather than discouraging him, each rejection reinforced his determination:

> 'When [one application] did not work out for me, I started thinking about how else I could go, but I knew I would go abroad, no matter how. I could not see my future staying here in Nepal. I used to apply for places, thinking that if one does not work out maybe the other will.'

This trajectory reflects the cognitive shift from deliberation ('is this worth pursuing?') to implementation ('how can I succeed?'), as described in the action-phase model (H. Heckhausen & Gollwitzer 1987; Kley 2011). Once committed, migration became Janak's central life goal and a core component of his imagined future self, eclipsing all alternatives. From an attributional theory lens, Janak

saw his unsuccessful attempts as a mix of internal and controllable factors, like devising different strategies, and external factors out of his control but also unstable, like luck, chance, shifting policies and visa approval rates. In such situations, individuals often persist, convinced success is merely a matter of trying long, often, hard, and smart enough (Weiner 2010).

In many cases, persistence is further supported by an expansion of the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004) and the widening of what Ray (2006) terms the aspirations window – or put simply, what individuals perceive as possible. Prior to his relative's migration, Janak considered Europe beyond reach. But observing others around him succeed reoriented his aspirations towards migration and elevated his expectations of upward social mobility beyond what he deemed attainable in Nepal – underscoring the central influence of relatable role models on aspirations and notions of the possible (Gartzia et al. 2021; Morgenroth et al. 2015). Once expanded, such aspirational horizons often persist (T. Bernard et al. 2026).

More broadly, relative deprivation arising from social comparison (Stark & Taylor 1989) and strong 'cultures of migration' (Ali 2007) tend to reinforce persistence. In many contexts, migration functions as a rite of passage and a marker of adulthood (Mondain et al. 2013). Observing peers achieve mobility and recognition intensifies the psychological strain of involuntary immobility (Debray et al. 2024). As migration becomes increasingly imbued with symbolic value, necessity, and urgency, mobility struggles may become all-consuming (Conrad Suso 2022). Repeated failure in such contexts often generates profound shame and self-doubt, as individuals increasingly worry that their inability to succeed is due to personal flaws and fundamental inaptitude (cf. Weiner 2010):

> 'I felt a lot of frustration and tension. … Everyone was able to go … [but] wherever I put my hands, it was not successful. Nothing was working out for me. … I had countless sleepless nights, thinking about my future. … At times I used to think, why was I even born in the first place?'

Under such conditions, abandoning migration may feel akin to abandoning the self. Sustaining the struggle for mobility thus becomes a form of self-preservation (cf. Miceli & Castelfranchi 2017), even as it produces profound emotional distress.

Persistence is also shaped by social expectation and shame. Where migration is socially valorised, attempts to move are often concealed – even from close relatives – as a strategy to reduce pressure and avoid stigma. After multiple failed attempts, Janak stopped disclosing ongoing application processes to his family, who pushes him to go abroad.

> 'My parents and family … have seen other people and their situation so they tell me to go abroad. … They want me to go abroad as soon as possible. … [So] in many instances they do not know that I have been applying. I told them only after I had applied.'

Publicly articulated migration plans can generate or further increase external expectations that reinforce commitment and compel continued effort to save face (Bredeloup 2017; Darby et al. 2022; Van der Meij et al. 2017). This dynamic resonates with research on goal disclosure and commitment (Jiao & Cole 2020; Klein et al. 2020; McGregor & Elliot 2005; Peetz et al. 2025).

As Janak's case shows, mobility struggles can be driven by both autonomous and controlled motivation (Ryan & Deci 2000). Individuals seek not only personal advancement but also to meet expectations associated with gender, kin, and socially defined life-course roles (Debray et al. 2024; Mata-Codesal 2018; Stoker et al. 2025). In some cases, the aspiration to migrate may partially reflect an aspiration to

try to migrate, fulfilling a socially prescribed role rather than expressing a genuine personal desire to move.

Finally, persistence is reinforced by prior investments. Despite substantial financial losses, Janak eventually also sold his small business to fund and focus on further migration attempts. This reflects the 'sunk cost' effect, whereby past investments discourage disengagement even when alternative options may be more beneficial (Arkes & Blumer 1985; Brockner 1992; Haita-Falah 2017).

> 'Sometimes, I think: what if I had invested [all that money] in something here? … I would have been able to pay it back already.'

Nevertheless, like many others, Janak often felt that he had already invested too much to give up. Only recently, after years of failed attempts, he has begun to tentatively explore an alternative future in Nepal – a shift we revisit below.

4.1.2 Shifting gears: adjusting aspirations and efforts

While initial responses often involve intensified efforts and strategic adaptations (assimilative coping) like in Janak's case, repeated setbacks may prompt *accommodative coping*: the adjustment of goals to constraints (Brandtstädter & Rothermund 2002; Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. 2003). Here, accommodative coping does not involve questioning and abandoning migration projects in their entirety. Rather, individuals compromise on specific parameters to increase their chances of success, often by shifting to a second-best destination, visa category, or adopting alternative routes. This corresponds to what goal adjustment theory describes as a scaling back of goals to more achievable levels within the same domain, leaving the higher-order aspiration intact (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. 2003).

Raúl's case exemplifies this process. A 39-year-old Salvadoran, he initially aspired to migrate to the United States, which he associated with safety and the possibility of living openly as a gay man. His plan – regular migration supported by family networks – appeared feasible. However, when he came out to his family prior to departure, their rejection eliminated both emotional and financial support, fundamentally altering his migration prospects.

His initial reaction was to intensify efforts, engaging in assimilative coping: he took on additional work and sought support through online migrant networks. Yet these efforts proved insufficient. As opportunities failed to materialise, he confronted what control theory describes as a 'possibility frontier' – limits not easily overcome through effort alone (Brandtstädter & Rothermund 2002; J. Heckhausen & Schulz 1995). Without adjustment, such situations risk devolving into hopelessness (Wrosch & Miller 2009). Over time, Raúl's engagement with online communities shifted from distraction to exploration. Through interactions with migrants across Europe, he encountered new narratives of mobility and belonging. Migration came to be redefined – not solely as reaching a specific destination, but as achieving a particular way of life:

> 'The USA was it for me. … But when everything happened, I felt so lonely. … Then I met people living in Europe … and seeing how they built their lives there made me think that maybe my dream didn't have to die.'

This marked a transition to *accommodative coping*. Rather than abandoning migration, Raúl reoriented his aspiration towards alternative, more attainable destinations. Such shifts become more likely as individuals perceive opportunity windows closing, particularly in relation to age or life-course expectations (Donovan & Williams 2003; J. Heckhausen & Tomasik 2002).

Crucially, this adjustment depended on both feasibility and desirability. Online interactions expanded Raúl's perceived opportunity structure (Europe as accessible) and legitimised its attractiveness (Europe as socially inclusive and LGBTQ+-tolerant). Amsterdam, previously absent from his plans, emerged as a viable 'second-best' option aligned with his revised aspirations. He ultimately travelled there on a tourist visa and overstayed.

Raúl attributed his failed attempt to migrate to the United States not to personal inadequacy but to external constraints, specifically family rejection and restrictive immigration systems. Such attributional framing helped preserve his sense of agency and sustain motivation. As attribution theory suggests, interpreting failure as external and contingent to specific circumstances rather than internal and fixed inadequacies facilitates continued goal pursuit (Weiner 2010). Similar patterns appear across cases: by framing obstacles as structural rather than personal, individuals maintain hope and persistence (Crane & Searle 2016; Foll et al. 2006; Haugen & Lund 1998; Seery et al. 2010).

Raúl's trajectory demonstrates how persistence can be sustained through flexibility. His shift from an unattainable pathway to a viable alternative reflects selective disengagement from blocked goals combined with renewed engagement in achievable ones. In this sense, accommodative coping enables adaptive continuity: individuals preserve commitment to core aspirations even as they revise the means through which these aspirations are pursued.

4.1.3 Hanging on: active waiting and the deferral of migration attempts

A third form of persistence we commonly observed is *active waiting*: a mode in which individuals maintain strong migration aspirations and continue to imagine a future elsewhere, yet temporarily suspend direct actions towards realising them (Carling et al. 2023; Rodríguez-Peña 2024; cf. Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. 2003). Rather than abandoning migration, they defer migration attempts, often because they are uncertain how to proceed or anticipate that their opportunities and capabilities to move will improve over time. In contexts of constrained mobility, migration frequently entails prolonged preparation – waiting for bureaucratic processes, favourable opportunities, or the accumulation of sufficient financial resources. Such waiting occurs not only in countries of origin but also in transit contexts, where individuals become temporarily immobilised while still oriented towards onward movement (Achtnich 2022).

Abdullah's trajectory illustrates this dynamic. A 47-year-old Syrian Kurdish man with limited formal education and a father of two, he was living in Athens in 2023 after leaving Syria in 2021. His original goal had been to reach Germany or Austria, where relatives resided. However, after exhausting his financial resources, he became stranded in Greece. Despite having lived there without legal status for over two years at the time of our interview, Abdullah had neither relinquished his aspirations nor reoriented his efforts towards settling locally. Instead, he remained firmly committed to onward migration, directing his energies towards preparing for a future opportunity to move.

This orientation shaped his strategic choices. Rather than applying for asylum in Greece – which he believed would reduce his chances of continuing his journey – he worked irregularly and saved money for another future attempt. His daily practices thus reflected not disengagement, but a suspension of direct action towards migration combined with ongoing preparation. Greece was not conceived as a place to build a life, but as a temporary holding space in a longer migration journey. Abdullah's interpretation of his journey resonates with research on attributional style. Like others discussed earlier, Abdullah framed both past setbacks and future prospects in ways that preserved a sense of agency. Prior to the conflict, he had made repeated efforts to improve his family's circumstances in Syria – opening a tailoring business, migrating temporarily to Egypt, (unsuccessfully) attempting to acquire property – yet without achieving aspired social mobility. These experiences left him with a diminished sense of

control over life in Syria. In contrast, migration to Europe represented a pathway to regain control, particularly for the sake of his children's future. Abdullah attributed his chances for onward movement partly to internal, controllable factors – such as persistence and personal effort – and partly to external but unstable forces, including luck and circumstances (e.g. evading border controls). This combination allowed him to sustain a sense of possibility:

> 'Now at this time I have one goal: just to live in security. … I consider that it is over for me, but to secure the lives of these children, and that they learn and study – what I could not reach, they can reach.'

Crucially, he did not perceive structural barriers to mobility as fixed or insurmountable. Instead, he viewed them as shifting and inconsistently enforced, and therefore potentially surmountable over time. Waiting was thus not passive resignation but a strategy grounded in anticipation:

> 'I wait for the circumstances to help me, you see how people are leaving.'

Abdullah's invocation of divine will reinforced this orientation. Indeed, religiosity can support attributional patterns that frame adverse outcomes as external, temporary, and context-specific, thereby sustaining hope and perseverance (Greening & Stoppelbein 2002; Vonk & Pitzen 2016). Migration research similarly shows how faith can help individuals endure prolonged periods of uncertainty and waiting (Cham 2024; Odgers-Ortiz et al. 2025; Straut-Eppsteiner 2017). In Abdullah's case, belief in God's will coexisted with a commitment to continued effort, jointly underpinning his capacity to endure stagnation without relinquishing aspiration.

Active waiting is a common consequence of involuntary immobility in contexts where both opportunities to move and capabilities to build a meaningful life locally are limited – whether in countries of origin, transit, or first destination (Conrad Suso 2020; Gaibazzi 2015; Scharrer et al. 2024). Individuals may experience constrained control over their local circumstances while perceiving migration as the primary – or only – pathway to a desirable life.

In such contexts, active waiting can appear externally as passivity. Individuals remain strongly oriented towards an imagined future elsewhere while disengaging from local opportunities. This orientation may serve as a form of psychological escape from constrained present conditions, but it can also produce ambivalent effects. While migration imaginaries may sustain hope and provide a sense of direction, their prolonged deferral may give rise to frustration, rumination, and despair. At the same time, behavioural inaction can clash with local norms of productivity, exposing individuals to social stigma – being labelled as idle, confused, or irrational (Gaibazzi 2015; Conrad Suso 2022).

Active waiting thus occupies an ambivalent position. It is both a coping strategy and a form of suspended agency: individuals remain tethered to the mobility struggle, sustaining aspirations and preparing for future movement, even as direct migration attempts are paused.

4.2 Reconsideration

While some individuals maintain and adapt their migration aspirations and efforts after experiences of involuntary immobility, others begin to question their migration projects altogether. The reconsideration pathway is characterised by inner tension, indecision, and uncertainty, but also deliberate openness to different (im)mobility outcomes. Individuals reassess the feasibility, timing, and desirability of migration overall, and often begin seriously considering alternative life trajectories, including possibilities for staying. As a result, they may pause or scale back their cognitive and behavioural efforts to migrate, while simultaneously exploring and investing in local opportunities.

Importantly, reconsideration is not necessarily triggered by a specific experience of involuntary immobility; it may also emerge when local opportunities arise or personal circumstances shift. The following vignettes illustrate two prominent manifestations of reconsideration: action crises and parallel investment.

4.2.1 Action crises

Repeated setbacks in a mobility struggle can culminate in an action crisis, a severe internal conflict on whether or not to continue their pursuit of migration. Action crises often arise after migration attempts nearly succeed but ultimately fail, forcing individuals back to the starting point. Such situations may occur at the final stages of a long and complex application process, through refusal at a border or deportation from a transit country, or simply because of unfortunate timing. Having come so close to achieving their goal, many had already seen their migration as imminent, have mentally relocated their future, and have taken decisions aligned with the anticipated move. When the attempt is ultimately thwarted, these plans and expectations collapse abruptly, intensifying the emotional impact and deepening the severity of the action crisis.

At age 27, Nisha from Kathmandu had already tried for years to move to the United States and Australia as a student, before applying for New Zealand. Following months of research, document preparation, and waiting, Nisha received university admission and a student visa; but three days later, New Zealand abruptly shut its borders as part of its COVID-19 lockdown, and her offer and visa expired. The sudden loss of this anticipated future triggered a profound crisis. The thought of starting over after coming so close felt crushing and debilitating:

> 'Suddenly, everything changed, and I felt like I fell down from 99 to level 0. … I had started shopping, resigned from the job. … I felt like I would have a secure future, I would study, I would get a degree from New Zealand, and I would be able to do something in life. … After spending all that money on the process, I would have to work again, save the money, … prepare the same documents, join the IELTS class. And in the class, there are high school students, and I am the only old one. It's kind of weird.'

As Nisha's discomfort in the language class illustrates, action crises can also be triggered or intensified by life-course perceptions and social clocks: individuals may feel they are approaching – or have already passed – the age at which migration or the life goals associated with it are expected to occur (Neugarten et al. 1965; see also Lewis & Weigert 1981). When individuals perceive themselves as falling behind these timelines, doubts about whether migration remains achievable or worthwhile may become particularly acute.

Importantly, severe action crises manifest not just through decisional conflicts but also undermine health and well-being. Studies have linked action crises to depression, anxiety, heightened stress, and physical illness (Herrmann & Brandstätter 2015; Holding et al. 2021; Klinger 1975). Nisha developed high blood pressure and went on medication to cope with suicidal thoughts:

> 'Thinking too much about it, my mental health also got bad. … I did not want to live my life anymore and commit suicide. … I lost my confidence, everything. … I was mentally drained and I was also getting sick physically. … I felt like my life was done.'

Yet the low point of an action crisis can also stimulate profound contemplation and soul-searching, allowing individuals to recover psychological well-being by reframing migration and adopting new priorities and attitudes to life:

> ‘I started writing a diary, so that I could get some mental relief. …. I used to write every day, and a lot of it was about health and wealth. … Then, it hit me that my life is okay and it has not been as bad as I had thought. … I only wished to be a healthy person and live a normal life.’

However, action crises do not necessarily lead to disengagement from migration. Some individuals regain commitment and persist in their migration endeavours. Others remain uncertain about the viability of migration and begin to invest in both leaving and staying at the same time – another common manifestation of the reconsideration pathway.

4.2.2 Parallel investment

Reconsidering migration after experiences of involuntary immobility often involves a search for local alternatives – and sometimes, pursuing them alongside continued migration efforts. Such local opportunities may act as fallback options should mobility attempts continue to fail, but also as equally attractive alternatives or even as preferred futures with migration retained as a backup plan.

When we met Janak from Kathmandu, he had begun to wonder whether he was simply not meant to move:

> ‘I was trying and applying to go abroad multiple times, right, and it did not work for me. So, around 4–5 months ago, … I thought maybe it’s an indication for me to not go abroad.’

Religious or spiritual beliefs may not only sustain persistence in difficult migration pursuits (Cham 2024; Feyissa Dori et al. 2025) but also offer a rationale for stepping back from them by interpreting repeated failed attempts as the outcome of fate or higher forces (Piya 2025; cf. Norenzayan & Lee 2010; Spilka et al. 1985). In this period of uncertainty, Janak applied for the civil service in Nepal while still awaiting the outcome of work applications in Ireland and Romania. The civil service represented for him both a temporary and a potential permanent alternative to migration:

> ‘I thought, wherever it works for me, I will stick to it. If I pass the exam, then I will not go abroad … [or] I will go in the future. … If I get selected, then I would get the monthly salary, so I would do the work and stay here. I could also be with my family. However, if I do not pass the exam, I have another option.’

For Janak, both futures remained acceptable. Importantly, securing a civil service position would not necessarily foreclose future migration but provide income stability and the chance to accumulate savings for a potential move later on. Investing in local opportunities thus allowed him to spread risk after repeated failures while simultaneously preserving the possibility of migration.

This capacity to hedge against uncertainty makes parallel investment a common strategy in contexts marked by volatile local conditions and protracted, unpredictable mobility prospects (cf. Lundqvist 2020). In such situations, individuals often seek to build broader capabilities – education, skills, experience, capital, or networks – that enhance their lives locally while also improving migration prospects. For instance, many young Nepalis pursue training as baristas or beauticians: occupations that are common among Nepalis in Western destinations but are also in growing demand domestically as cafés and beauty parlours proliferate. Similarly, many young middle-class Syrians in Greece took up NGO work or pursued further education, seeking to strengthen their profile for future lives at desired migration destinations once migration attempts were successful, while also constructing a more acceptable present in Greece.

4.3 Disengagement

Alongside persistence and reconsideration, experiences of involuntary immobility may also lead to disengagement – a gradual withdrawal of the aspirations, imaginations, emotional attachment, and efforts that sustain migration projects, usually accompanied by a reorientation towards staying. Rather than abrupt, this process of accommodative coping typically unfolds incrementally and not without emotional turbulence, as individuals rework the meaning of migration and staying within their broader life trajectories (Gray 2011; Ortiga & Macabasag 2021a). We distinguish three dominant forms of disengagement, which we discuss in turn: acquiescent, affirmative, and precarious disengagement.

4.3.1 Acquiescent disengagement: accepting the 'good-enough' life

Many individuals eventually come to terms with their inability to move. We refer to this process as acquiescent disengagement, culminating in what Schewel (2015) terms 'acquiescent immobility' – a state of relative contentment with staying and acceptance of mobility constraints. Acquiescent disengagement often involves reappraising local life as not ideal but 'good enough'. While moving through her action crisis, Nisha's perspective began to shift:

> 'I felt like maybe I should give up on this and look for something else. … Maybe I should just accept [it]. I had already spent lots of money and I had wasted almost 10 years already. … I had tried so many times; and sometimes one has to give up. In real life, it's not all about motivation, we have to give up as well. … I don't have many expectations [anymore] and want to live a simple … good-enough life.'

However, it took Nisha several years to fully disengage from her mobility struggle. She still applied twice to universities in Canada, largely due to family pressure. Over time, however, she asserted greater autonomy:

> 'I told them that I did not want to go but … I felt like I had to. … I was sure that my visa would be rejected. … My family still insists that I go abroad. … I used to think a lot about what my mother was telling me.'

Nisha's case highlights the social embeddedness of mobility struggles. Expectations and support from family and friends can sustain persistence but also facilitate disengagement. A close friend supported Nisha emotionally and materially, helping her imagine a future in Nepal and buffering familial pressure:

> 'He broke that cycle for me…. I felt like I could do something here and there was nothing wrong in it.… [Now] I want to stay in Nepal … and live a normal life.'

Disengagement can function as adaptive self-regulation, protecting self-worth and enabling individuals to move on rather than ruminate over past failures (Barlow et al. 2020; Kappes & Schattke 2022; Wrosch, Scheier, Miller et al. 2003). Nisha found relief by attributing failure to luck rather than personal inadequacy:

> 'I used to believe that hard work is enough and there is no such thing called luck. But … I got to know that luck does matter. … It was not my fault.'

Her reorientation was also shaped by age-related considerations and perceived time constraints that shifted her priorities:

> ‘If I go [abroad] after the age of 31, it will take two to three years to study and another four or five years of working. That means six to seven years will be gone. So then, when will I get married, have kids, and raise them? I will not have my own family.’

This reflects the importance of perceived life-course deadlines and socially constructed age norms in shaping mobility decisions. Major life events and transitions like education, marriage, parenthood, or the death of relatives can decisively shift migration projects (de Groot et al. 2011; Horowitz & Entwisle 2021; Kley 2011). Nisha’s case illustrates how broader perceptions of age, normative life stages, and one’s position therein also shape aspirations and, in turn, mobility struggles (see Neugarten et al. 1965). More generally, resignation to constraints and disengagement from mobility struggles tends to become more likely with age, as local ties and responsibilities tend to increase over the adult life course (Coulter 2013).

Although individuals who acquiesce to immobility gradually withdraw from migration-related aspiration and efforts, they do not necessarily come to *prefer* staying. Many remain conditionally open to migration should circumstances change. Nisha, for instance, now considers herself too old to migrate independently and establish a life abroad from scratch. However, she explained that she would still consider moving if she were to marry a Nepali partner already securely settled abroad. Others move beyond accepting immobility and embrace staying more fully, which we turn to next.

4.3.2 Affirmative disengagement: embracing staying

Beyond the reluctant acceptance of immobility, some individuals disengage from migration through a more profound and affirmative reorientation towards life in place. In this form of disengagement, migration aspirations are not simply abandoned but actively reinterpreted, devalued, and replaced with locally grounded aspirations. Particularly in contexts where migration is widely associated with success, such reorientation often entails redefining what constitutes a ‘good life’ and relocating perceived control from blocked migration pathways to domains where meaningful action remains possible. In this sense, affirmative disengagement operates as an active self-regulatory strategy that restores a sense of agency and protects well-being when prolonged efforts to migrate prove unfruitful (Wrosch, Scheier, Carver et al. 2003). Rather than rejecting mobility altogether, some individuals recalibrate it – integrating limited and instrumental forms of movement into broader, place-based life projects (like short-term travel for skills acquisition or capital accumulation), while clearly subordinating such mobility to long-term commitments to staying. Others take a more defensive stance, positioning themselves explicitly against migration as a life strategy.

The trajectory of Disasa, a 25-year-old from Casamance in Senegal, illustrates this form of affirmative disengagement. Upon entering university, he developed a clear plan to pursue a master’s degree abroad, targeting destinations such as Canada or France. From his first year, he began saving part of his scholarship to finance his goal, at times even skipping meals to accumulate funds. His aspirations reflect a broader pattern among young people in Senegal, where migration occupies a central place in life projects. Within this deeply entrenched culture of migration – particularly salient among young men – international mobility is often framed as a key pathway to adulthood, social recognition, and the capacity to provide for one’s family (Debray et al. 2024; Rodriguez 2015).

After two years of sustained effort, however, Disasa came to recognise that studying abroad was financially unattainable. His savings were insufficient, and his family lacked the means to support his ambitions. At this juncture, his project underwent a decisive transformation:

> ‘After two years, I told myself no, I have to create other things. … I read [the book] *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*. That’s what changed my mindset. … I told myself, I need to get into entrepreneurship.’

This moment marked not merely the abandonment of migration, but a redefinition of success itself. Rather than locating achievement in international mobility, Disasa began to associate it with local initiative and entrepreneurial activity. He redirected his savings into launching a small e-commerce business in Ziguinchor with a friend, which he now sees as the foundation for a larger future venture in ICT and commerce.

This reorientation was strongly supported by his older brother, whom Disasa credits with ‘teaching [him] everything’, financing his education, and remaining actively involved in the business. Beyond material support, this relationship provided a stable moral and practical anchor, grounded in what Disasa describes as ‘blind trust’. The presence of such a locally embedded role model proved critical. By embodying a viable pathway to economic success without migration, his brother – a local entrepreneur himself – expanded the horizon of what Disasa perceived as achievable and desirable (Gartzia et al. 2021; Morgenroth et al. 2015). In doing so, he contributed to reshaping dominant migration-oriented scripts, demonstrating that recognition, autonomy, and upward mobility can be realised through staying (cf. Mesplé-Somps & Nilsson 2023).

Disasa now articulates a firm stance against long-term migration, associating it with precarious living conditions, loss of autonomy, and diminishing quality of life. While he does not entirely reject mobility, he reframes it in narrowly instrumental terms:

> ‘Right now, no – migration, that’s a no. What are we going to look for over there? We can get it here. … I don’t see the point of going somewhere else just to live the “metro, work, sleep” routine (laughs).’

His aspirations are now firmly anchored in Ziguinchor. He envisions himself not only as a successful entrepreneur but also as a locally recognised figure: ‘a personality in the region, a model’. Success is thus redefined in relational and place-based terms: local recognition, economic independence, and the ability to contribute to one’s community replace migration as markers of achievement. Importantly, such a reorientation is more likely where alternative pathways to the ‘good life’ are both socially recognised and materially plausible (Appadurai 2004; Fischer 2014) and when migration is not intrinsically valued but largely instrumental – a means to broader ends such as education, income, or social mobility, rather than an inherently valuable experience in itself. In such cases, migration can be more readily substituted by alternative strategies that serve the same broader life aspiration. For some individuals, migration aspirations also conflict with other goals or life domains, generating tensions that may resolve through disengagement (cf. Kruglanski et al. 2002; Rodríguez-Peña 2024). Moreover, in contexts different from Disasa’s, where migration carries less social value, expectations, and pressure, individuals can embrace staying with fewer feelings of shame or the need to justify their decision.

Finally, migration aspirations are often temporarily bounded, tied to specific life stages, opportunities, or crises. A scholarship abroad, a temporary economic shock, or a transnational relationship may generate time-limited motivations to move. When such conditions change or expire, migration may lose its relevance, leading to relatively rapid affirmative disengagement. In these cases, abandoning migration does not require a profound redefinition of the good life but rather reflects the shifting alignment between aspirations, opportunities, and life-course trajectories.

4.3.3 Precarious disengagement: from struggles to move to struggles to stay

A third dominant form of disengagement arises when individuals abandon migration aspirations and instead seek to build a meaningful life in place under highly precarious circumstances – such as conflict, environmental disaster, or economic collapse. Rather than continuing to invest in migration, they redirect cognitive and behavioural efforts towards developing the capabilities required to endure and adapt locally, despite persistent threats to safety, livelihoods, and well-being. In doing so, they transition from a struggle for mobility to an *immobility struggle*: the effort to build a viable life in place under challenging circumstances.

Omar's trajectory illustrates this shift. A 17-year-old from Aleppo, he initially shared the migration aspirations common among youth in war-torn Syria. However, when his older brother left for Germany, Omar assumed financial responsibility for his parents and two sisters. Around the same time, neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Turkey tightened border controls, further restricting exit options. Omar was only willing to migrate through regular channels, rejecting irregular routes, particularly 'via the sea'. He attempted to leave Syria twice but without success. On one occasion, shortly before turning 18, he was apprehended at the border for lacking his father's formal consent. A later opportunity to study abroad in Dubai was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Over time, these setbacks led Omar to relinquish concrete migration plans. He completed high school and obtained a university degree in informatics, yet found that educational attainment yielded limited returns in a context of economic collapse. Instead, he redirected his efforts towards sustaining his family through multiple forms of work, including trading cars and taking over his father's job ironing clothes. Unlike many others, his family home remained intact, sparing him the additional burden of paying rent.

Precarious disengagement often crystallises around turning points or 'vital conjunctures' (Johnson-Hanks 2002), in which opportunities and material or social conditions shift decisively. For Omar, assuming financial responsibility for his family marked such a moment. These conjunctures – frequently compounded by prior failed migration attempts – reshape perceptions of feasibility and can lead individuals to conclude that leaving is no longer a viable option.

Precarious disengagement is particularly prevalent among those with strong caregiving and financial responsibilities and embeddedness in family networks, where social norms discourage departure. It is further reinforced by limited financial resources, risk aversion, and clearly bounded migration conditions, like migrating only through regular channels or to specific destinations (Dennison 2026; Huber & Nowotny 2020).

Precarious disengagement is not simply a resignation to immobility. Rather, it is underpinned by a comparative assessment of control: individuals may perceive greater agency in attempting to improve their circumstances locally, however constrained, than in pursuing migration with highly uncertain and diminishing prospects of success (cf. Stoker et al. 2025). Omar's account reflects this reasoning. While he felt unable to leave due to both financial obligations and lack of resources, he also framed migration as a disruptive reset that would negate his accumulated efforts:

> 'I can't accept the idea of turning back to zero and rebuild my life. That's why I prefer to stay here, even if life is so hard. At least I know that I can improve my conditions.'

This sense of relative control was shaped by several factors. Omar and his family had avoided political affiliation, reducing direct exposure to violence from both regime and opposition forces. The absence of rent obligations provided a minimal degree of economic stability. Moreover, he cultivated a forward-looking belief that the worst of the conflict had passed and that current hardships were, to some extent,

manageable. He also reframed his situation through downward social comparison, positioning his family as comparatively fortunate:

> 'There are [other] people who really tasted the pain. Thank God, we are not among those who suffered the most. Some lost family members, others lost parts of their bodies, their homes, their businesses.'

Yet reorientation towards staying often introduces its own set of struggles. In (post-)conflict settings, environments marked by ecological risks, or contexts of chronic economic precarity, efforts to build a life in place are often undermined by structural constraints. As Omar's experience demonstrates, these include limited livelihood opportunities, underemployment, and diminishing returns to education. Notably, constrained capabilities to stay are not unique to conflict zones but represent a broader structural condition that can compromise dignity, safety, and basic rights (Schewel 2026).

In most acute cases, such conditions may erode not only material possibilities but also the capacity to aspire itself (Transiskus & Gholamzadeh Bazarbash 2024) – possibly trapping individuals in a vicious cycle of poverty, precarity, and low aspirations (Ray 2006). While a full conceptualisation of immobility struggles lies beyond the scope of this paper, we suggest that they share key features with mobility struggles: repeated attempts to improve one's situation, recurrent setbacks, and ongoing reassessments of viable futures. Periods of doubt may prompt renewed consideration of migration, and in some cases, individuals transition back into mobility struggles as aspirations to move re-emerge. Shifts between mobility and immobility struggles are thus dynamic and contingent. They are shaped by evolving structural conditions, changing perceptions of feasibility and control, life-course transitions, and vital conjunctures that reconfigure aspirations, opportunities, and constraints.

5 Conclusion: towards a new research agenda

This paper introduces the notion of the mobility struggle as a conceptual framework to capture the diverse ways in which individuals navigate involuntary immobility over time. To overcome the challenge of identifying involuntary immobility empirically, we take experiences of involuntary immobility as our starting point: moments in which individuals conclude they are unable to realise a specific migration aspiration (perceived inability) or fail in an attempt to do so (revealed inability). These experiences refer to specific migratory options rather than 'migration' as a whole – indeed, one of the forms in which individuals often persist in their mobility struggle is by adjusting migration aspirations and efforts towards more achievable migration alternatives.

By integrating theoretical approaches from psychology with the migration literature and our own findings, we identified three broad aspirational and behavioural pathways that follow experiences of involuntary immobility: persistence, reconsideration, and disengagement. These ideal-typical pathways result in different outcomes. Persistence can lead to a successful subsequent migration attempt or another experience of involuntary immobility, thereby entering a new iteration of the model. Reconsideration of the feasibility and appeal of migration may result in renewed aspirations and efforts to move or disengagement from the mobility struggle. Disengagement, whether preceded by extensive reconsideration or not, constitutes a gradual process through which individuals come to accept, embrace, or even struggle for immobility, reorienting towards the pursuit of a 'good (enough) life' in place.

Within the wide range of individual responses, we presented dominant manifestations of these pathways, highlighting the processes through which migration aspirations and cognitive and behavioural efforts to achieve them are reconfigured over time: in the persistence pathway, migration

aspirations are generally upheld or adjusted, while cognitive and behavioural responses range from increased migration efforts to active waiting. In the reconsideration pathway, action crisis and parallel investment constitute phases where aspirations become unsettled and actions are scaled down, put on hold or target moving and staying in parallel. Finally, we demonstrate that the disengagement pathway can take acquiescent, affirmative or precarious forms, which differ in the conditions and extent to which individuals relinquish their migration aspirations and redirect their efforts towards a life in place.

Table 1. Directions for future research on how key mechanisms shape mobility struggles

Domain	*Research avenues*
Commitment, alternatives, and capabilities	How do the strength and intrinsicality of migration aspirations and prior investments in their fulfilment affect mobility struggles?
	How do local alternatives interfere with commitment to migration and influence aspirational and behavioural pathways?
	How do enhanced capabilities to migrate *and* build a meaningful life locally shape the duration and dynamism of mobility struggles?
Meaning-making, attributional styles, and social norms	How do individuals experience, interpret, and explain experiences of involuntary immobility?
	When and how do different attributional styles sustain efforts to migrate, produce action crises, or encourage disengagement from migration?
	How do social norms about migration and staying shape which behavioural responses to experiences of involuntary immobility are viewed as legitimate, desirable, or attainable?
Family, kin, and relevant others	How do family members, partners, peers, and social networks condition mobility struggles – both individually and through their interaction (e.g. reinforcing, conflicting, or balancing one another)?
	How does autonomous versus controlled motivation to migrate shape aspirational and behavioural persistence in mobility struggles?
Time, transitions, and the life course	How do duration and reiteration of mobility struggles influence whether individuals persist, reconsider, disengage, and re-engage with migration?
	How do changing opportunities and critical personal/societal events transform migration aspirations, capabilities, and efforts to move?
	How do life-course transitions, social clocks, and developmental deadlines affect the timing, urgency, intensity, and direction of mobility struggles?

However, it would be wrong to assume that disengagement from the mobility struggle implies lifelong immobility. Rather, it represents a turn away from migration *for now*; migration aspirations and efforts could often reignite at a later point in life, under different terms or for other purposes. Likewise, successful migration can resolve struggles for mobility, though sometimes only temporarily. Often, a first move is only part of a larger mobility struggle, as Abdullah's migration from Syria to Greece shows. But even where this is not the case, migrants may later develop onward or return migration aspirations, or get stuck at a first destination in a multinational migration trajectory (Amrith 2021; Paul & Yeoh 2021). The mobility struggle model therefore applies to various spatial and temporal contexts of involuntary immobility. While its emphasis lies on struggles for international migration, the

framework can also account for constrained internal migration endeavours. Moreover, some individuals may turn to domestic migration as an alternative to blocked international mobility or as a strategic step towards subsequent international migration (King & Skeldon 2010).

Drawing from literature across the social sciences and psychology and our own empirical work, we identified key mechanisms that structure and shape mobility struggles. These relate to (1) motivation, investment, commitment and alternatives to migration, conditioned by capability sets and opportunity structures; (2) the interpretation of involuntary immobility shaped by attributional style, norms, and narratives of migration, (3) the role of family, kin, and close others in supporting, pressuring, inspiring, and obstructing migration pursuits and disengagement, and (4) perceptions and experiences of time and the life course via social clocks, developmental deadlines and vital conjunctures. We suggest that mechanisms in these domains, among others, are key to understand how mobility struggles unfold, and we provide directions to explore them in future research in **Table 1**. Moreover, we argue that greater interdisciplinary engagement and stronger integration of literatures across social and behavioural sciences – which we have only begun to do here – will be necessary to further theorise how individuals navigate involuntary immobility over time.

Addressing these empirical questions requires a multi-pronged methodological approach. Longitudinal surveys can track changes over time and identify key patterns and drivers, but offer limited explanatory depth due to reductive variables and difficulties in tracing processes across the 'blind spots' between data collection waves. Qualitative methods like biographical interviews are well-suited to provide deeper insights into the continuities, disruptions, and causalities of individual mobility struggles, but can suffer from memory bias, post hoc rationalisation of experiences, and 'retroactive linearity', whereby life trajectories are recounted as overly smooth and driven by agency rather than structural forces (Bivand Erdal 2017). We therefore argue that an eclectic mix of methods is necessary to theorise mobility struggles over time and reveal their underlying emotional, cognitive, and behavioural processes.

With this research agenda, we heed calls to address the mobility bias in migration studies (Schewel 2020) by focusing on large populations who stay immobile against their wishes. At the same time, we contribute to efforts to integrate a temporal lens into migration theory by advancing a dynamic, process-oriented understanding of involuntary immobility. The framework proposed in this paper offers conceptual tools to study how mobility struggles unfold over time and opens new avenues to theorise the interplay of aspirations, behaviour, and constraints to mobility.

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