
Retaining Non-EU Immigrants in Rural Areas to Sustain Depopulated Regions: Motives to Remain

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Article

Retaining Non-EU Immigrants in Rural Areas to Sustain Depopulated Regions: Motives to Remain

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Abstract: Rural areas, as a system, face multiple challenges. Among these are population decline and attendant economic and social maladies namely demographic issues considering a scarce population. Pull factors for immigrants to go to other countries are known, nevertheless, to comprehend factors for remaining in rural areas after arriving could support a strategic local policy, and for an informed practice. The purpose of the study is to explore motivations shaping immigrants' intentions to stay in the Alentejo, a depopulated region in Portugal, using a qualitative approach. Research questions are: What motivates immigrants to remain living in depopulated regions in Portugal? Furthermore, what contributions can practitioners and immigrants give for local policy and practice? Eight practitioners and fifteen non-European Union immigrants living in this region were interviewed between 2020 and 2021. Empirical data were analysed, supported by MaxQDA software. Results point out that the intention to remain in rural areas arise from a progressive construction, it is a process that immigrants experience to become motivated to stay long-term. Factors influencing the process include four components: 1. instrumental and material motivations; 2. emotional and social motivations; 3. motivations based on quality of life; and 4. motivations based on political dimensions. Components are conditioned by the availability of : stable and suitable jobs, access to decent and affordable housing, as well as quality of education and health services for their children; additionally to socio-emotional satisfaction, as family reunification, migrants network, integration and real intercultural living in the host community, close relationships to practitioners from social services; and quality of life, such as lower rents, peaceful and secure living conditions, granted a better future for their children as in any another place in Europe, associated finally to the simplified policy enabling one to become a legal citizen. Conclusions highlight implications for policy and practice, suggesting more investment for rural regions to reverse depopulation reality.

Keywords: International immigrants; Rural areas; Depopulated regions; Keeping people in Low density territories; Regional development

1. Introduction

Rural systems tend to be described by three subsystems: economic subsystem/industry subsystem, social subsystem/population subsystem, and land subsystem/spatial subsystem, and framed within a social-ecological framework [1]. In this work we pay attention to several challenges faced by rural areas [2]. These systems are characterized by poor access to public services and jobs, low accessibility, lack of innovation and economic competitiveness and precarious governance [3,4]. Therefore, in Portugal, a policy of positive discrimination emerged, for the so called "Low Density Territories" (LDT). The term is applied to disadvantaged areas, based on populational density, demography, population, socioeconomic and geographic features, and accessibility aspects [5] to support their sustainable development. Sustainable development is increasingly viewed as being the way to promulgate just and practicable economic, environmental, and social policy [6], therefore in this article, contributions for policymakers are presented.

The issues presented above are underlain on depopulation caused by a long-standing exodus phenomenon, since citizens decided to move to big cities and abroad [7,8]. Both, pull factors for going to other cities or countries, and push factors for leaving rural areas contribute to depopulation [9] and to the absence of people and services [2]. Migration¹ to smaller cities and rural areas can help to overcome depopulation and ensure the viability (or return) of basic services such as schools, hospitals, and shops, as well as greater diversity, which is associated with economic growth [10,11,23].

Morén-Alegret and colleagues [11] present demographic, social, and economic challenges faced by rural areas and small villages, arguing international immigrants are adding value and playing a role in the sustainability and development of these areas, namely immigrant entrepreneurs. The authors discuss three dimensions on their empirical results: environmental, economic, and social sustainability, based on immigrants contributes living in rural mountains. Immigrants are transforming rural challenges in opportunities, as exemplified “Opening municipal politics up and encouraging respect for others, instead of prejudice, gossip, racism, classism and sexism” (p.290).

Although we study rural areas and their challenges as ageing, scarcely population, and so on, knowledge of each region allows a deep understanding. Thus, it is relevant to know socio-demographic and economic characteristics of a concrete rural region.

1.1. Rural areas – facts and figures of the Alentejo

Population density in the Alentejo region is on average 22 inhabitants/Km² [13]. For a basis of comparison, the European Commission [13] defines rural areas whenever the population density is fewer than 300 inhabitants/Km². And Portugal has an average 113 individuals per km², while the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon (the capital city) has 952 [14].

In the region there was a decrease of inhabitants in 2021, around 7.0% of 704,533 people [12]. Odemira stands out, it is sited in the Alentejo region, however, it is the Portuguese municipality with the highest population growth in the last 10 years, and that is justified by international newcomers.

In a demographic perspective, the aging index is high in the Alentejo, particularly in the interior near the border with Spain within a rural context [15]. It is recorded an increase in ageing (219 elderly per 100 young people) and a decrease in rejuvenation population [12]. The birth rate is 7.4, compared to 9.3 in the Metropolitan Area of Lisbon and 7.7 in all the country [16].

Observing economic indicators, the Alentejo region has the lowest activity rate (44.6%). 291,269 of employed individuals and 4,193,900 non-active population. [14]. As result, there are a couple of municipalities with the highest unemployment in the country. Economic activities highlighted are commerce, then industry, agriculture, the construction industry, financial and state activities.

The region has the most derelict housing as well. However, rents tend to be below the national average, 328 euros per month. Rents exceeding 1000 euros, are mainly in the Metropolitan Area of Lisboa [14].

The Alentejo stands out as having a low crime rate, and for being a safe place to live in, for both nationals and immigrants. However, human trafficking is noticed, as well as labour exploitation, particularly associated with agricultural work [17].

Although, immigrants are largely living in urban areas, rural areas have increasingly begun to attract immigrants in considerable numbers [9], as in the Alentejo for example. In 2021 there were 23,737 (19.8%) newcomers [18]. In total, there was a total of 52,316 immigrants of 1,089,023 in the whole country [19,20]. Nationalities of third-country citizens in the Alentejo more represented were

¹ In this paper terms *migrant/immigrant/migration* are used to refer to third country nationals (TCN) people, that is any person who is not a citizen of the European Union within the meaning of Art. 20(1) of The Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union – Consolidated Version of. Official Journal of the European Union. 2012. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12012E/TXT&from=EN>. And therefore, it may include a person with or without residence permission.

Brazil (10,083), India (7,383), Nepal (3,659), Romania (3,197), Ukraine (2,224), China (1,591), the United Kingdom (1,434), and Angola (723) [21].

Although detailed data about immigrants living in the Alentejo are not available, national reports [18] present that 77.1% of the immigrants are in working age, being more expressive in the range 25-44 years old. Employment is the main reason to request authorization for residence in Portugal. Immigrant children (13.6%) are more than immigrant old people (9.3%), the opposite is seen between the nationals. And men sum 52.4%.

Initiatives to contribute to both stopping and reversing this situation, retaining natives, and attracting and then retaining newcomers can support a sustainable development of these regions, and immigrants play an important role for sustaining communities [9,11,22,23].

1.2. *Why immigrants remain in adverse places?*

Pull factors for immigrants to go to rural and depopulated regions are highlighted by literature [9]. Nevertheless, understanding factors for remaining after arriving at these areas are central to consolidating the presence of people toward a strategic local policy to attract and retain immigrants, and an informed practice for social inclusion. This study is relevant considering that a challenge for rural areas is achieving long-term integration, as migrants often seek to leave for bigger cities [10].

The vast majority of residents in rural areas are international immigrants who come to work in low-skilled jobs as agriculture, construction, agribusiness, the care of dependent people, and in other services [22]. The labour-intensive and export-oriented agriculture acted as a magnet for migrants [9,10,23]. Although employment and job conditions may represent a key motivating factor to stay in rural areas [10,22], decisions are most often based on a combination of both material and emotional considerations, balancing experiences of and aspirations for the past, present, and future [24].

Flynn and Kay [24] argue that both material (access to jobs and housing) and emotional aspects [as positive relationships] and emotional integration must be addressed. For example, when an immigrant is offered the opportunity of a permanent contract, he/she may decide to stay and plan to bring family [e.g., a daughter or an elderly mother] to live with them. Thus, reuniting family constitutes an important step towards a more permanent stay, and in fact family reunification and bringing in other compatriots are desirable to sustain these regions.

Valdez and colleagues [25] present psychological, social, and political factors that have been used to explain immigrants' transition in orientation from temporary to permanent settlement, in an anti-immigration state in the USA. In terms of personal motivations, they found perseverance, resignation, and fatalism, as well as religious faith. In terms of family and community factors, the authors present dreams and hopes for their children; access to community resource; social ties and belonging. Feeling connected with a community seems to influence immigrants' decision to settle permanently [26]. Finally, in terms of socioeconomic and political motivations, the authors [25] found relevance in the conditions in the host country and the country of origin, including security/ violence issues, as well as perceived sociopolitical constraints in other municipalities. Therefore, economic crises, anti-immigration sentiment and unstable employment opportunities influence willingness to stay in adverse places.

Places as rural areas and smaller cities offer advantages according to Gauci [10], as it is easier to develop a social network that supports immigrants' integration. He presents as an example, the lesser the risk of school segregation because for instance there is only one school. In comparison with big cities, there are "Greater opportunity for interaction with local communities, a more tight-knit safety net [...] Integration efforts with lower budgets [...] job opportunities in the location, property [rental] prices and reasonable connections [in terms of cost and time]" (p. 31).

Another profile of settled immigrants are relatively high-income individuals/ families [9], namely from the United Kingdom (complementary to other European countries) who after Brexit are also considered third-country nationals. More recently, it is noted the impact of the changing nature of work such as the increase of remote working [27], i.e., digital nomads, which has also resulted in greater movement toward people living in smaller municipalities [10]. Quiet and peaceful

surroundings difficult to find in a city, and therefore, better for their children are also a motivation to stay in depopulated regions [24].

However, Flynn and Kay [24] say that “For many of our participants, longer-term stays had not been initially planned, but had gradually emerged, becoming the plan for the foreseeable future” (p.60). Thus, immigrants may consider alternatives to staying, and thus if the risks and uncertainties are higher, they remain [25].

This research explores the motivations shaping immigrants’ intentions to stay in the Alentejo, a depopulated region in Portugal, using qualitative methods. Research questions are: 1) What motivates immigrants’ decision to remain living in depopulated regions in Portugal? 2) What contributions can practitioners and immigrants give for local policy and practice? Since most research has tended to focus on large cities, and to a lesser degree on rural areas [8], the present study is innovative and timely.

The paper is part of a larger project, funded by the European Union’s Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), integrating a range of components: training for practitioners, sharing practices, and scientific research. The project was awarded by the Centro de Estudos Ibéricos with the Research, Innovation and Territories Award 2023.

2. Materials and Methods

The empirical research design [28] is grounded in a qualitative approach, supported by interviews. The main research questions [28] include: 1) What motivates immigrants’ decision to remain living in depopulated regions in Portugal? 2) What contributions can practitioners and immigrants give for local policy and practice?

The theoretical sampling [29,30] was supported by maximum variation and convenience criteria gathering empirical data until theoretical saturation.

Participants of the study consist of eight practitioners who work with non-European Union immigrants/ third-countries nationals, and fifteen immigrants who work and live in the Alentejo region. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for several months, between 2020 and 2021. The length of the interviews was around 1:20 hour each, and all were voice recorded (after given permission). Conversations occurred in Portuguese, except one, an immigrant from India, having arrived the year before, and with poor language skills.

The topics of the interviews were significantly wide considering the broad research project. Therefore, they consist of a characterization of the immigration process and families, as well as the integration in the host country. Then practices and activities on the promotion of social inclusion, and finally suggestion to improve migration policy and to support local policymakers. For this specific study, questions focus particularly on what could set a person in that municipality, what could be attractive for immigrants wanting to stay.

2.1. Participants

The study (n= 23) consists of two different groups: practitioners (n=8) and international immigrants (n=15).

The group of practitioners are social worker members of local centers for support and integration of migrants (named CLAIM), or from municipalities. These CLAIM and municipalities operate in the Alentejo region. It is likely these practitioners have higher education, it means a degree in Social Sciences (Social Work, Social Pedagogy, and Psychology), as well as in Engineering, and in Architecture. They are predominantly natives from Portugal, 3 males (37.5%) and 5 females (62.5%).

The second group included international immigrants, non-European Union natives. The participants came from Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Cape Verde, Moldova, Ukraine, Brazil, Venezuela, and China. Some of the participants had secondary education level, and others have bachelor’s, master’s and even PhD degrees. Their labour is related to accounting, hairdressing, factory work, social services, vigilance, and research. It involved 8 males (53.33%) and 7 females (46.67%), between 26 and 67 years old. Regarding the length of stay in Portugal, the range is from 4 up to 30 years, thus they arrived from 1993 until more recently in 2019. Among the participants, 6

(40%) intend to return to their country of origin and 8 (53.33%) intend to stay in Portugal, 1 (6.67%) of the participants did not want to answer.

2.2. Analysis

Empirical data was transcribed verbatim in Portuguese, except the referred one. The task was supported by *Express Scribe Pro* software. Qualitative data from interviews were analysed supported by *MaxQDA* software and inspired by Braun and Clarke's [31] work on thematic analysis.

Coding and categorizing, and then finally an in-depth interpretation were conducted in order to obtain immigrants and practitioners points of views on the discussed topics [31]. Steps of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke's [31] were led, and lastly the manuscript was written.

After the analysis, and during the writing of this paper, the narratives were translated into English for an international audience.

3. Results

The present study explores the reasons shaping immigrants' intentions to remain in the Alentejo region, a rural and depopulated region in Portugal framed as a low-density territory. The results section presents findings from the empirical research, organized around immigrants' motives to stay for long-term, regarding personal, family and community factors, as well as socioeconomic aspects.

Factors found were grouped into four dimensions presented as components and called 1. Instrumental and material motivations; 2. Emotional and social motivations; 3. Motivations base on quality of life; and finally, 4. Motivations base on political dimensions.

3.1. Motivations to stay long-term

3.1.1. Instrumental and material motivations

Instrumental and material motivations consist of factors related to basic needs, economic aspects, employment, housing, for example. However more than just getting an employment is determinant to remain in adverse and depopulated regions, it means that, stable and suitable jobs are required for permanency. As well as access to decent and fair housing, without race and cultural discriminations from landlords. And additionally, quality of both education opportunities and health services for their children, that is seen as an investment for a better family future. Employment is presented by participants as a key factor for an international immigrant from a third country to feel attracted by Portuguese rural areas and smaller cities. Other factors are not so relevant for them while this first requisite is not satisfied. Agriculture is the main sector welcoming immigrants' workforce, but in depopulated regions, there are vacancies from all economic sectors beyond agriculture. It is very likely to find jobs in hotel business, construction, and cleaning services. As well as qualified jobs, as looking for health professionals and academic researchers. Once these regions present manpower shortage and therefore offer jobs for immigrants, they tend to remain in these places. Quotes from participants are consistent and allow understanding that it is unanimous.

"While there is work, they [international immigrants] will continue here [...] – In your opinion, what brings migrants to this specific region? – Jobs, job opportunities. They heard about a job opportunity." [Practitioner CLAIM 1a]

"A lot of agriculture and therefore a lot of immigrants because of employment." [Immigrant 9, Ukraine]

"they know that they can easily get a job here, in an orchard, it means, in the agricultural sector." [Practitioner 3, municipality 2].

"there is also a shortage of manpower in other sectors beyond agriculture" [Practitioner 4, CLAIM 3].

"here they can also get jobs in hotels, construction industry, house cleaning..." [Practitioner 2, CLAIM 2].

“employment... In the hospital, we have doctors and nurses from Spain and from Brazil. They come to work here.” [Practitioner CLAIM 3]

In the Alentejo region, particularly in the agricultural sector, employment tends to be seasonal and therefore precarious with several uncertainties. Consequently, when unemployed and no job opportunities appear, immigrants tend to leave the region, seeking a job in other municipalities or even in another country. Employment stability could retain immigrants in depopulated regions, according to the interviews.

“they work seasonally in the production of olives, and the they leave, then they come back, because there is the harvest of red fruits, and so on.” [Practitioner 2, municipality 1]

“if they cannot find a job, they leave... residual unemployed immigrants remain here. We know a family who are unemployed who are having family and friends support and our help, but the situation is becoming unbearable”. [Practitioner CLAIM 1a]

Rural regions and smaller cities, compared with bigger cities, are more attractive in terms of employment because lower skills are required based on the shortage of manpower since there is few active populations. Therefore, once an applicant appears interested in work, he/she get the job even if his/her experience does not fit the vacancy.

“here labour markets are not so demanding, and that is an advantage” [Immigrant 3, Brazil]

“Lisbon is a big city where employment can be gotten in civil construction or in companies where Portuguese speaking is needed. Thus, the only way to get a job is leaving Lisbon and therefore they come until here and then they stay, they remain here.” [Practitioner 4, CLAIM 3].

“in Lisbon [city], they need to speak Portuguese, the language is a problem. So, they come here to work [namely in agriculture] and then they remain.” [Practitioner 3, CLAIM 2]

One of the reasons for the importance of being employed, and keeping it is that it means earning money and sending remittances to the country of origin namely to pay dues, sustain their family and their projects. For immigrants it is mandatory.

“they say: if I don't send money to my family, they don't eat” [practitioner 4, CLAIM 3].

“they aim to work extra hours to earn more money and send it to their families” [practitioner 1, municipality 1].

The housing availability is another relevant factor to attract and retain immigrants in depopulated regions once they get employment or are seeking it there. However, we found that availability of houses is not enough, adequate housing conditions, and comfort are demanding, as well as the right to access a home within a suitable rent and eliminating discrimination from the landlords only based on race and origin and before knowing a person. Owing to the scarcity of houses, they tend to be overcrowded or immigrants are likely to rent accommodation without a housing license, for example closed restaurants or empty stores, and garages suites too. Furthermore, undocumented immigrants are considered illegal, so they have not the right to housing support from a municipality or from the national social security benefits

“- [...] not sure what could root them here, perhaps housing issues.” [Practitioner 1, municipality 1].

“there are 3 or 4 families in a 3 bedroomed house in order to share costs” [Practitioner 1, CLAIM 1].

“it is a house that even has housing license [...] it was a restaurant” [Practitioner 1, municipality 1].

“here there are few conditions on housing. Houses are not furnished or are in the historic center and very damp and deprived... they rent it. They submitted themselves to those conditions [...] they ask us for beds and even mattresses therefore they are sleep on the floor.” [Practitioner 3, CLAIM 2]

Housing provided by an employee is seen as an advantage in rural areas, since an immigrant may be hosted on the farm itself, where he/she works.

“the vast majority work on farms, a lot of them stay on the farm” [Practitioner 1, municipality 1].

Within the reality described, the participants suggested political and private investment in the region, namely on housing and infrastructures serving immigrants’ needs to attract and retain them.

“there is an airport, but it doesn’t operate, there is a train, but it doesn’t operate. Thus, while there isn’t an improvement in the infrastructure in the region, the municipalities are hampered.” [Practitioner 1, municipality 1].

“[...] municipal houses are occupied, therefore if there was a political investment to rebuild other houses... because there are a lot of empty old houses here, a lot of uninhabited houses [...]” [Practitioner 4, CLAIM 3].

Access to quality services and resources, particularly whenever comparing to their country resources is a key factor to want to stay for long-term. This aspect is even more relevant as an investment for their children in the present and future grounded on quality education and health, that they perceived as better, well equipped, and supportive. Third nationals’ citizens envisage that Europe is the best continent for safety and quality of life, and therefore the Portuguese rural areas are covered too. According to non-European Union citizens, these areas are as good as any other European destination.

“it is possible to have family, to give education to your children, it’s possible to give it... there are health, hospitals, a good hospital, and the local health center is good as well. And schools..., there are good schools, even good universities here.” [Immigrant 5, Brazil].

“she said: I want to give my children an European education. I want my children to access health. I want them to have educational opportunities that I could never give in my home country” [Practitioner 4, CLAIM 3].

3.1.2. Emotional and social motivations

The called emotional and social motivations dimension is grounded on factors related to socio-emotional satisfaction. This satisfaction can be achieved by the family presence and wellbeing; engaging in migrants’ networks; being really integrated with locals; and establishing close relationship with social services.

The second component consists of an emotional dimension that is a complement to the instrumental aspects presented before for an immigrant wanting to stay in these regions. Having a stable employment and a house, the next step may be arranged, that is linked to relationships with own family and others. Thus, emotional and social factors of motivation arise in both, personal and family wellbeing. Being well and having their own family around providing emotional support, is central. Participants said that family represents an important value for immigrants, therefore family reunification is also an instrument to integrate and retain them in depopulated regions. Immigrants that had already brought their children to Portugal are more likely to remain where they are, to provide more comfort and family stability what perhaps was not possible in the past.

“they want to root here, bring their family, bring their wives and children who remain in the country of origin. Sometimes they bring them *in dribs and drabs*, now comes the wife, then one son. They come to work and later bring their families.” [Practitioner 3, CLAIM 2].

In addition, the social integration level of an immigrant in the host community is relevant to he/she desiring to remain. Here integration is discussed based on strong ties to neighbours and local community and the sense of belonging, as well as the relationship established with practitioners and social workers from local services and organizations that work with migration issues. Professional relationships built and the quality of practices is demanded for immigrants’ satisfaction.

“there was a link to the local community and if there is an opportunity, they go there. That’s called integration!” [Practitioner 4, municipality 2].

“once arrived, they get to know the municipality and services, where to ask for responses. Our capacity of welcoming makes them want to stay. And then, relationships... they build their relationships as all of us, and... establish a connection to people.” [Practitioner 4, CLAIM 3].

“we work close to them, and become a reference for them, someone who they can trust. From then on, they always come here, ‘cause they know if the topic is not up to us, we refer them to the suitable service!” [Practitioner 3, municipality 2].

“immigrants once here, want to be illegal, so, if an organization exists to support them, well...[even better]. They will want to stay, and of course if they get a job!” [Immigrant 1, Guinea Bissau].

Migrants informal network allows them mutual aid and peer support, namely for those who lack their own household. There is a tendency for migrants to witness their experience to their compatriots, that is stimulating. Then they bring those compatriots to the same destination, and that supports sustainability since it means new inhabitants for rural regions.

“the household pull friends. And if there is employment, they stay.” [Immigrant 3, Brazil].

“a person who comes here, is following another one.” [Immigrant 6, Brazil].

3.1.3. Motivations based on quality of life

Motivations base on quality-of-life dimension is founded on reasons as: lower rents comparing to other destinations; quiet and security; and guarantee of a better future for their children.

Thus, this third component of reasons for non-UE citizens’ immigrants reaching and staying in these regions starts with the perception of quality of life, peace, and a sense of security offered here. These constitute important dimensions that they lack in their country of origin, and perhaps in Portuguese big cities. Security and tranquillity are seen as an investment and a priority for their children. Children are a great motivator to tackle migration challenges, for them, immigrants accept to do sacrifices.

“They stay because of the quality of life” [practitioner 2, CLAIM 2].

“I walk on the street fearless [...] security, any hour night and day.” [Immigrant 10, Cape Verde].

“They tell me that after his son-in-law had been murdered on a street, it was impossible to keep living in Brazil.” [Practitioner 4, CLAIM 3].

Secondly, the cost of living is cheaper in rural areas than in big cities. Participants highlighted lower rental costs, as rent being the higher monthly expenditure.

“I was invited by my sisters to leave and move to Lisbon. I reflected on the pros and cons because of the rental costs...” [Immigrant 7, São Tomé e Príncipe].

“here is very quiet and life is pretty cheap” [Immigrant 13, Guinea Bissau].

Reviewing their trajectories, immigrants consider that closer relationships and integration, and easier network and support from the community, as well as economic stability perhaps by remote work are advantages of small places that provide a standard of living.

“So, you become friends, within a calm way of life.” [Immigrant 11, Brazil].

“here is a calm place and with generous local inhabitants... the kindness that we get here... international students wouldn’t receive it in all places.” [Immigrant 13, Guinea Bissau].

3.1.4. Motivations base on political dimension

Finally, motivations base on political dimension is grounded on factors associated with the simplified procedure to become legal to live in Portugal.

The fourth component found in participants discourses raises on the open-doors migration policy framed to combat workforce shortages in Portugal, considering that demographic issues are present in the whole country.

Open doors for international immigrants from third countries is the most stimulator factor in choosing Portugal as a destination. Portugal is known for its simplicity on the regularization procedure to become a legal resident, when compared to other western countries. Obtaining nationality is also a simplified procedure in Portugal, and consequently the European citizenship. This allows a third national person to move and live in another European country and earn higher wages.

“the regularization procedure is faster. And even if they wait for three or four years, they know that they will get the document. Third country nationals since the law amendment may enter in Portugal lacking proof of legal entrance.” [Practitioner 3, municipality 2].

“the regularization procedure in Portugal is very... let’s say, more simple, less complex than in Italy, Spain or Germany.”. [Practitioner 3, municipality 2].

There are several criteria enabling authorization, participants stated the option of becoming legal through employment or their descendants.

“I always tell an immigrant: if you want to live here, the first thing to do is have babies. Having a baby born in Portugal they may request authorization for residence by the child” [Practitioner 1, CLAIM 1].

In smaller cities, services tend to deal with a lower number of service users and perhaps responses are prompter.

“[immigration and boarder service] here addressed half a dozen immigrants per week and now it is half a dozen per day. [...] 90%, almost 100% of the service users are from abroad.” [Practitioner 2, CLAIM 2].

In sum, participants presented their perspectives on motivations shaping immigrants to stay in Portuguese depopulated regions and smaller cities as the Alentejo region. Practitioners and immigrants interviewed discussed factors that are attracting immigrants to be there, and what could retain them if political investments were made. Therefore Figure 1 includes participants’ suggestions for policy and practice, as well as for host communities.

Our thesis counters the common perception that immigrants will stay in rural areas for employment, and that if employment is ensured they will remain for money and remittances, as long it is warranted. Furthermore, this study found that immigrants’ basic needs are more than an employment. They desire stable and suitable jobs, access to decent and fair housing, as well as quality of education and health services for their children. These, additional to socio-emotional satisfaction, as family reunification, migrants network, integration and real intercultural living in the host community, a close relationship to practitioners from social services; and finally quality of life, as lower rents, quiet and security, granted a better future for their children as in any other place in Europe, associated with the simplified policy to become legal in Portugal, emerges a progressive will for an immigrant to remain in a rural region once living there. It is a constructed process for them to become motivated to remain.

Policy and practice must plan strategically to address ecosystem needs, to be more worthwhile and chosen when an immigrant balances between their current situation and their perception of what alternative scenarios in another place as middle and bigger cities.

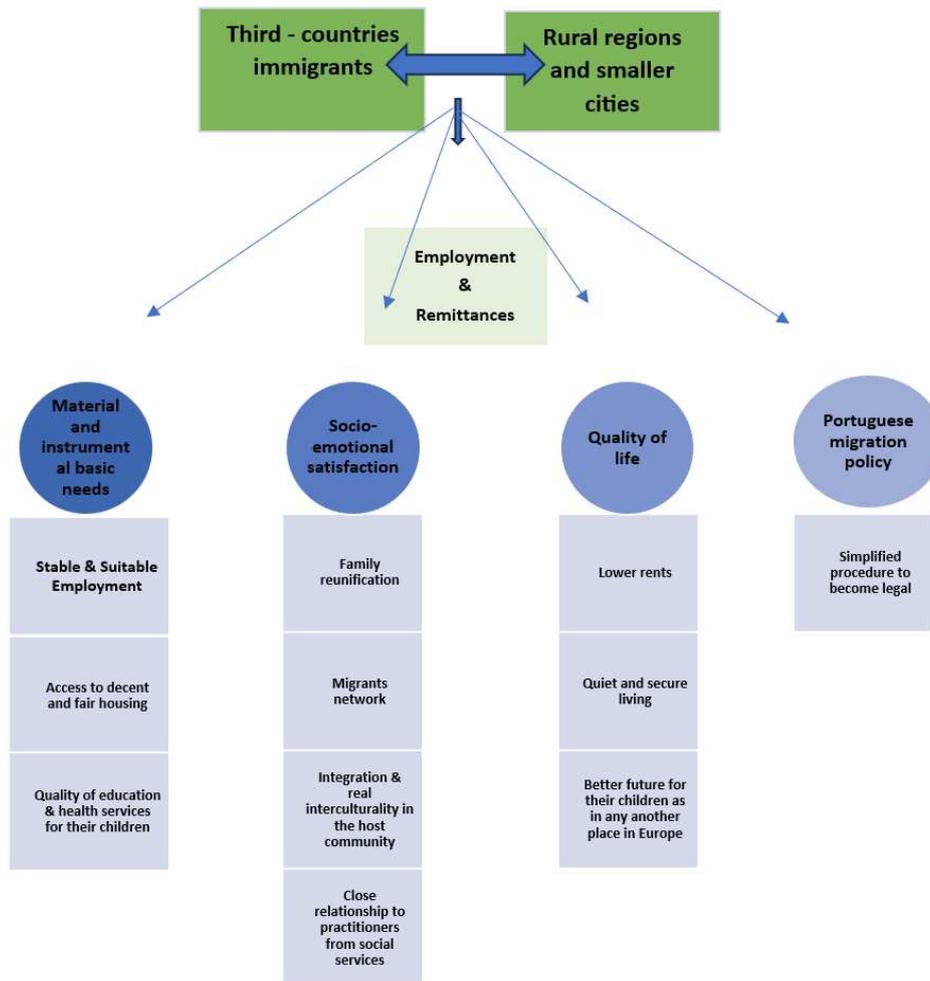


Figure 1. Diagram on factors influencing immigrants' motivation to remain in rural areas. **The process of immigrants becoming motivated to remain in rural areas - Factors influencing long-term stay.**

Source: own elaboration.

4. Discussion

This study explores the motivations shaping immigrants' intentions to stay in rural regions and smaller cities, particularly in the Alentejo characterized by depopulation issues. Practitioners and immigrants described a set of factors that they believe are influencing and could influence third-country nationals immigrants to remain in the region.

The study design and results are innovative; therefore, results are discussed with literature on motivations for living in other places.

Results stated that staying permanently in the Alentejo may be a constructive process, and not an objective and previous aim. That is aligned with Flynn and Kay's [24] discussion, saying that long-term becomes the foreseeable future plan. Therefore, rural policy makers are called to strategically stimulate it.

Immigrants needs identified in results must be addressed by local and regional policy, as immigrants reflect and balance their experiences and aspirations for the past, present, and future [24], and thus, foreseeable risks and uncertainties that Valdez and colleagues [25] note. Having that idea in mind, we conclude that immigrants remain if assurance and certainties are higher where they are, than in other destinations.

Employment and economic migrants are unanimously referred to in findings and, in the literature, related to migration phenomenon [10,22], but our study found that employment by itself is not enough for a newcomer to live in an adverse place, therefore, firstly employment should be

stable and suitable, and then, others basic needs must be addressed, as suitable and rentable housing access. The access to quality of education and health services for their children is essential for a third-country national living in the Alentejo, and it could be said that it is relevant for any immigrant with children, it is well known [7,25] that a reason to leave a country is the prospect of a better life for their children, namely European governments-sponsored services, and resources.

Family-focused motivations to leave and to remain are present in all discourses, as well as informal networks [7,10] that attract foreigners and that facilitate social integration in a new place. However, a set of emotional satisfaction determinants for third-countries immigrants wanting to stay are not sufficiently explored by literature, as well as the relevance of building a close professional relationship with social workers who work in organizations for migration. More and more, psychological aspects are becoming relevant and complementary to economic ones. Rural areas and smaller cities may provide a stronger ties between newcomers and host communities, for stronger ties with the host community than with the country of origin. These regions may be prepared to reduce integration efforts, with lower rents, greater community support, less traffic and thus time spent, as highlighted by Gauci [10].

Four components were constructed in this study, grounded in participants interviews after a thematic analysis: instrumental and material motivations; emotional and social motivations; motivations based on quality of life; and motivations based on political dimensions. Valdez and colleagues [25] present psychological or personal, social, and political factors in an adverse destination but in an anti-immigration state in the USA. Personal motivations as perseverance, resignation, fatalism, and religious faith did not emerge in our findings. However, the called family and community factors, as dreams and hopes for their children; access to community resources; and social ties are aligned with our results. Authors discuss the sense of belonging, and feeling connected to the community, similarly to Chavez [26], unlikely participants' narratives remotely touch on those concepts. Perhaps a reason for disparity could be the length of the permanence in the host community, language similarities, or cultural differences between newcomers and locals in both studies.

Gauci [10] states that "in many cases, the number of refugees moving to small cities is determined by national policy through dispersal policies for instance" (p. 30), and based on that policy view, we recommend a regional and local policy to develop rural areas grounded in a strategic management of migratory flow.

Destined rural areas need to consider it worthwhile to invest in integration for retaining immigrants. Both immigrants and host communities must address integration needs on a basis that immigrants are there to stay and therefore longer-term engagement and integration worth the investment of resources, time, and effort programmes [10]. Accessing services, such as healthcare are relevant, therefore these services need to be accordingly equipped to deal with the continuous increase of immigrants [8,20,21,23].

Based on its results, the present study recommends designing local policies within a strategic plan that includes actions addressing, intentionally, international immigrants' issues in order to stimulate their retaining, as well as their families, in depopulated regions. Namely: 1) awareness of labour market/ employers for a) the rights of immigrant employees, as permanent contracts to keep them for long-term; b) valuing cultural diversity; and c) recognizing previous skills/ education. 2) Encouraging private investment for renovation and offer of houses, and mediating rental contracts, avoiding contact between landlords and immigrants, and therefore discriminations; providing legal support for contentious; 3) reinforcing non-governmental organizations on migrants' rights to guarantee information, counselling and referrals for every one once needed; 4) promoting activities for intercultural dialogue in host societies, and for a neighbour sense of community; 5) Stimulating family reunification; 6) providing more public transports and accessibilities. For social inclusion, more infrastructures and services, local policymakers should mobilize European Union budget applying for the European Social Fund+, the European Regional Development Fund, Erasmus+, and others founds (European Commission, 2020).

The deepened knowledge presented by this study may inspire other European (and abroad) countries that are facing similar challenges and contributes to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of the 2030 UN Development Agenda that pays explicit attention to rural issues.

5. Conclusions

Europe is facing an internal demographic challenge that may have serious consequences on the sustainability of its social model, because of ageing. For rural areas, the challenge is even more predominant. Migrants who want to come to Europe may represent a resource for these areas once they become attractive. How low-density territories can attract third national citizens supports the relevance of the present study.

The main lesson is a two-way investment: new arrivals needs and host society awareness, both must want it, and must be involved as active citizens. Earlier and effective integration is mandatory.

Results show four components of motivation: instrumental and material motivations; emotional and social motivations; motivations based on quality of life; and motivations based on political dimensions. And that motivation for longer permanency in a rural region is not a pre-migration wish, in contrast it is a likely progression composed of a set of factors that produce desire for long-term permanence.

Implications target: 1) policymakers at a local e regional level (as well as central government) to plan strategically a set of actions to satisfy immigrants needs to retain them and their families in depopulated regions for sustainable development. 2) practitioners, who are the front line of social policies, we recommend building a very close support relationship grounded in an eco-systemic framework and fundamental rights approach. 3) host communities that must be aware of (and be made aware of) migration challenges and be available to foster and provide intercultural environments for richness and development of their territories. Complex problems must be addressed by multidimensional interventions, and therefore planned actions evidence-based supported by academia.

Some limitations of this study are presented, namely, in the representativeness based on the small number of participants since it is a qualitative approach. However, and as indicated before, theoretical saturation was assured.

More in-depth research is needed, namely on the impact of immigrants in low-density territories. Therefore, more data ought to be collected and framed into future research to address the evolution of immigration and its local impact aiming to inform local and national policy.

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