

Frontline Practices and Ambivalent Roles in the Reception and Integration of Immigrants in a Rural Area in Portugal

Práticas de primera línea y roles ambivalentes en la recepción e integración de inmigrantes en un área rural de Portugal

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In Portugal, rural areas have increasingly become immigrant destinations, and attracting them forms part of rural revitalisation strategies. However, these arrivals challenge municipalities with limited resources and capacity. Drawing on a qualitative case study in a municipality located in the Lower Alentejo region in southern Portugal, characterised by demographic decline and growing dependence on migrant agricultural labour, this article analyses front-line professionals' practices in immigrant reception and integration in a rural context. Within street-level bureaucracy and bordering practices, the analysis employs four analytical dimensions: structural scarcity and labour precarity of immigrants, formal and informal mechanisms, stereotypical representations, and migration-related tensions. The findings show how resource scarcity, political neglect, and tensions surrounding immigration reconfigure discretion and moral agency, requiring strategies beyond formal frameworks. This exposes tensions between a temporary-labour immigration model and structures designed for permanent population, where professionals perform ambivalent roles, facilitating or constraining access to services and rights.



Abstract

En Portugal, las áreas rurales se han convertido cada vez más en destinos de inmigrantes y atraerlos forma parte de las estrategias de revitalización rural. Sin embargo, estas llegadas desafían a los municipios con recursos y capacidad limitados. Basándose en un estudio de caso cualitativo en un municipio de la región del Bajo Alentejo (sur de Portugal), caracterizada por el declive demográfico y la creciente dependencia de la mano de obra agrícola migrante, este artículo analiza las prácticas de los profesionales de primera línea en la recepción e integración de inmigrantes en un contexto rural. Dentro de la burocracia a nivel de calle (street-level bureaucracy) y las prácticas de demarcación de fronteras (bordering practices), el análisis emplea cuatro dimensiones analíticas: la escasez estructural y la precariedad laboral de los inmigrantes, los mecanismos formales e informales, las representaciones estereotipadas y las tensiones relacionadas con la migración. Los resultados muestran cómo la escasez de recursos, el abandono político y las tensiones en torno a la inmigración reconfiguran la discrecionalidad y la agencia moral, requiriendo estrategias más allá de los marcos formales. Esto expone tensiones entre un modelo de inmigración de mano de obra temporal y estructuras diseñadas para una población permanente, donde los profesionales desempeñan roles ambivalentes, facilitando o limitando el acceso a los servicios y derechos.

Frontline practices; street-level bureaucracy; integration processes; rural areas in demographic decline

Prácticas de frontline; burocracia a nivel de calle; procesos de integración; áreas rurales en declive demográfico



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1. Introduction

Migration processes have increasingly challenged traditional understandings of service delivery and policy implementation, particularly as immigrants settle in diverse geographical contexts that extend beyond urban centres. Indeed, these rural territories, marked by depopulation and uneven development, can be seen as examples of “left-behind places” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). While the literature on left-behind places often focuses on out-migration, this paper provides insight into an area that, despite improving its economic condition, leading to in-migration, is still facing demographic decline, continued out-migration of the youth, and high levels of political discontent. Recent migration is thus emerging as both a symptom and a potential remedy for structural neglect.

In the context of public policy implementation, street-level bureaucrats emerge as key figures for understanding how policies and services are enacted in everyday practice (Lipsky, 2010). These professionals hold a discretionary power, which can directly shape access to services and determine whether the needs of the population are met. Their practices become particularly consequential when serving populations such as immigrants, who often navigate complex bureaucratic systems while facing communication challenges, cultural differences, and limited familiarity with institutional procedures.

Despite the growing recognition of rural areas as migration destinations, the literature on street-level bureaucracy and service delivery to immigrants has predominantly focused on urban contexts, leaving a substantial gap in our understanding of the rural specificities. This paper aims to address this gap by exploring the role of frontline professionals in the context of immigrant reception and integration in rural settings, drawing on their perceptions of migration in the municipality and accounts of their everyday practices. The analysis focuses on identifying key factors that shape their practices and how this might be modified or intensified by left-behind dynamics or rural peripheral territories in both structural and affective terms. This paper provides new empirical insights into migration dynamics in rural contexts, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how place-based factors influence professional practices.

To frame this analysis, the paper draws on three complementary strands of literature: street-level bureaucracy, integration processes, and new migration destinations. The street-level bureaucracy framework provides theoretical tools for understanding professional discretion, policy implementation processes, and the multilevel factors that shape practices and interactions with immigrant clients (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Hupe & Steen, 2022; Glyniadaki, 2021). In the context of the literature on integration processes, this paper maintains a particular focus on bordering processes that produce “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), associated with organizational perspectives (Lang et al., 2021). In turn, research on new migration destinations and integration processes in rural areas helps to delineate the specific challenges that arise in contexts with limited infrastructure or prior experience in immigrant reception (McAreevey & Argent, 2018), where the “accommodation of difference” can be conflictual and requires ongoing negotiation (Fonseca et al., 2021).

The study is based on empirical evidence gathered through interviews with public sector professionals and others involved in third-sector projects in a municipality located in the Lower Alentejo region in Southern Portugal. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how the local socio-spatial dynamic, articulated with population and migration characteristics, influences policy implementation, service delivery, and professional practices. We observe how, in practice, this rural context, heavily influenced by agricultural and seasonal activities, developed a specific type of service provision where professional practices intersect and are shaped by a context of limited resources, reduced specialized institutional responses, cases of labour exploitation, and increasing diversity within the migrant population in terms of legal status and temporalities. While some immigrants have managed to settle with their families, seasonal agricultural activities have hindered the permanent settlement of others. For frontline professionals, these constraints create challenges and the need to develop creative and alternative strategies to support clients, often addressing demands beyond their formal responsibilities or areas of expertise. The results reveal different roles that professionals play in the complex interplay between characteristics of the place and migrant population, structural constraints, professional agency, and individual values. By extending the frontline professional framework to rural peripheral territories, the conclusions underscore how resource scarcity, at the local level, and retraction at the central level, reshape discretion and moral agency (Lotta, 2021). Moreover, the analysis makes visible the tensions inherent in a model of immigration based on temporary labour and precarious living conditions, in a territory whose social and institutional structures are designed for permanent populations.

The article is structured as follows. The first section frames the background and context, focusing on spatial reconfiguration, the diversification of migration flows, and regularisation processes in Portugal, while also highlighting precariousness produced at the intersection of labour and legal status. The next section outlines the theoretical framework, bringing together the literature on street-level bureaucracy, integration processes, and new immigrant destinations to situate migrant reception within the broader dynamics of peripherality. The subsequent section presents the methodology. This is followed by four empirical sections exploring: (1) the structural scarcity and labour precarity of immigrants; (2) formal and informal mechanisms of intervention; (3) the impact of stereotypical representations of immigrants on professional practices; and (4) practices in light of social and cultural tensions. The final section concludes with reflections on how the experience of specific dimensions of left-behindness, namely demographic decline, service erosion, and political discontent, reconfigures the role and discretion of professionals in new immigrant destinations

2. Spatial Reconfiguration, Diversification of Immigration Flows, and Precarity

“The geography of immigration to Portugal is changing” (Fonseca, 2008), a trend already identified in the early 2000s. Historically concentrated in the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto and in the Algarve region, immigration has expanded to low-density municipalities and rural areas. Consequently, small municipalities have emerged as key territories for understanding ongoing transformations in Portugal’s immigration patterns (Observatório das Migrações, 2026).

This territorial redistribution is linked to the Portuguese economic model and to the growing demand for migrant labour in strategic sectors, particularly agriculture (Fonseca, 2024; Observatório das Migrações, 2026). According to 2025 data from the Instituto Nacional de Estatística (2026), foreign residents account for 30.2% of the total population in the case study presented here, ranking it among the ten municipalities in Portugal with the highest percentage of foreign population. Furthermore, foreign nationals already account for 48.9% of employees, highlighting the structural dependence on migrant labour (Banco de Portugal, 2024).

This new geography is accompanied by diversification of national origins. Whereas migrants previously originated predominantly from Portuguese-speaking or European countries, the current landscape reveals an increasing flow from South Asia, including India, Nepal, and Bangladesh (Fonseca, 2024). In the area studied here, immigrant settlement is also notably marked by Latin American families, especially Venezuelans, alongside a significant Timorese group. Notably, there is also a clear gender imbalance, with men representing the majority. This framework produces a diversification in the immigrant population in terms of legal status and temporalities.

Beyond labour market contributions, immigrants in low-density territories have been crucial in slowing down demographic decline, supporting the maintenance of basic services and local economic activities (Observatório das Migrações, 2026; Fonseca, 2024; Fonseca et al., 2021). In this context, the municipality studied here in the Lower Alentejo region constitutes an interesting case, where population decline coexists with a rise in the foreign population.

However, such transformations challenge receiving territories, often exceeding local infrastructures and services capacity (Fonseca, 2024). Migrants’ labour integration frequently oc-

curs in contexts characterised by informality, seasonality, and limited social protection, exposing workers to precariousness, housing vulnerability, and risks of exploitation (Observatório das Migrações, 2026). Demand for cheap and flexible labour, often mediated by temporary employment agencies and long-distance recruitment, exacerbates these vulnerabilities (Estevens et al., 2021).

The immigration law in Portugal (No. 23/2007) included, among other mechanisms, the so-called “Expression of Interest,” allowing regularisation without a prior visa if individuals showed employment and met requirements such as legal entry, criminal record clearance, and social security registration. It became a main pathway for regularisation, especially after the 2017 reforms, which allowed starting the process of regularisation with a job offer (Costa, 2025). After submitting the “Expression of Interest,” immigrants were considered to be “in the process of regularisation,” allowing them to work and make social security contributions, but with restricted access to health, unemployment benefits and enrolment in the Institute of Employment and Vocational Training (IEFP). This provisional document was also often rejected by employers or landlords, creating obstacles in accessing housing. Although support through civil society organisations remained available, prolonged delays in responses fostered this precarious situation.

Weaknesses in the implementation of the immigration law created a backlog of pending cases over several years, leaving many immigrants in legal precarity. This included failures in formal admission channels, particularly the visa system, limited administrative capacity marked by human resource shortages and technological fragilities (Costa, 2025).

Although this mechanism enabled more flexible and lower-cost recruitment (Malheiros & Peixoto, 2023), it was revoked by the new government in June 2024 due to a perceived “pull effect” for immigrants (Costa, 2025). Anti-immigration discourses linking migration to socio-economic threats (amplified by pressures on services and housing) further undermined its legitimacy and reinforced restrictive policies (Costa, 2025).

Another aspect fostering precariousness is linked to limitations in formal integration strategies. Even where some bureaucratic or language support exists, immigrants remain marginalised in the absence of structured policies (Sousa et al., 2020). Although local organisation is central to social cohesion, management often falls to municipalities with limited financial and technical resources, struggling to align policy with emerging immigration needs (Fonseca, 2024; Observatório das Migrações, 2026). In the municipality studied here, there has been an institutionalisation of various initiatives, projects, and policies aimed at the immigrant population. These include the establishment of a specialised service for immigrant support, the Local Support Centre for the Integration of Migrants (CLAIM), located within the premises of the Social Action department; the implementation of a Municipal Plan for the Integration of Migrants between 2021 and 2023, funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF); and the presence of an intercultural mediator, hired through a protocol between a social solidarity institution and the municipal council, recognised as a reference by both professionals and immigrant residents. Despite a certain degree of coordination among specialised immigrant services and public institutions, day-to-day dynamics reveal challenges. This will be analysed in the empirical sections later on.

3. Street Level Bureaucrats and Professional Agencies

The idea of “street-level bureaucracy” seeks to understand the practices, beliefs, and intentions of frontline workers in public services, the so-called “bureaucrats,” and how, in their daily routines, they implement public policies (Lipsky, 2010).

Bureaucrats are key agents of public administration, distinguished by their direct interaction with citizens and the discretionary power they hold (Lipsky, 2010). In this role, they become the embodiment of the state, a “face of government” (Zacka, 2017), and materialize its territorial presence (Hupe & Steen, 2022), in schools, health centres, social security service desks, and so on. The literature shows that these encounters shape perceptions of legitimacy and trust in political institutions (Zacka, 2017), while also being the point at which institutional inconsistencies emerge and are challenged (Dubois, 2023).

In the context of migration, some studies show how these points of contact can hinder or strengthen “integration attempts” (Belabas & Gerrits, 2017), as in addition to bureaucratic obstacles, these encounters involve power imbalances and asymmetric negotiations, in which emotions are deeply entangled (Borrelli, 2018).

Throughout the integration process, immigrants must engage in a series of bureaucratic contacts mediated by professionals to obtain information, access services, get translation support, and meet other needs. They may interact with professionals from specialized migrant support services (e.g., intercultural mediators, NGO staff, etc.) and, necessarily, with public service professionals who serve the general population, since they often provide essential services that cannot be obtained elsewhere (Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021). Given their influence in the distribution of public goods and welfare services, street-level bureaucracy proves to be highly relevant in studies of migration and integration (Lannutti, 2023).

In the realm of public policy in the migration context, states use policy instruments to regulate the entry and stay of immigrants through migration and integration policies, involving social benefits, political rights, language learning, and cultural programs (De Haas et al., 2020). However, sectoral policies, including labour market and welfare policies, often affect migrants more decisively (Czaika & De Haas, 2013). In practice, the work of professionals in immigrant support services and public institutions is shaped, directly or indirectly, by immigration, integration, and sectoral policies, with each professional assuming a role in promoting integration within a broader constellation of actors.

Given this scenario, and following Glyniadaki (2021), this study uses the term “frontline professionals” instead of “bureaucrats,” as it better fits the contemporary context of local migration governance by encompassing actors who implement public policies even if they are not civil servants.

Although legal frameworks guide practice, access to services depends to some extent on the judgement and discretion of those frontline professionals, who have specific capacities, perceptions, and preferences (Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016). In migrants’ experiences, everyday actions such as registering at a health centre or applying for a tax identification number can involve obstacles and varied outcomes, even among people in similar migratory situations. This underscores how implementation can be so influential that similar laws may be applied differently across contexts, while different laws may produce similar outcomes (Infantino & Sredanovic, 2022). While discretion is necessary, it directly shapes migrants’ lives, as documentation defines the possibilities of a dignified life (Costa, 2020). The literature therefore

provides several clues for analysing these behaviors through the lens of professional agency and their narratives.

3.1. The professional as a “state agent”

For Lipsky (2010), similarities in structure and working conditions explain similar behaviours among street-level bureaucrats who operate under stress, excessive demands, limited resources, and ambiguous rules. As rational actors influenced by these conditions, they develop a social construction of the client, standardising practices, categorising, and adopting strategies such as coping, creaming, and gatekeeping, which shape an unequal distribution of services.

However, Lipsky (2010) stresses that adverse working conditions do not apply to all contexts. For example, he notes that “in a small town, with a white, stable, and homogeneous population” (Lipsky, 2010), a social welfare department may perform its role with greater clarity of purpose due to the town’s “homogeneous political culture,” compared to large and heterogeneous urban centres where professionals may behave differently. From this perspective, frontline workers are seen as “agents of the State” whose behavior results primarily from the structural conditions under which they operate, an approach which Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) term the “state-agent narrative.” Although Lipsky (2010) does not delve into socio-spatial dynamics or the influence of migration in small towns, this point encourages consideration of local territorial characteristics, such as available infrastructure and population traits, as significant factors influencing professional performance.

While pertinent, Lipsky’s (2010) theory has limitations, failing to fully explore the reasons behind behaviours and, as Pires and Lotta (2019) note, neglecting to recognise workers as socially situated agents. By treating social inequality merely as a potential outcome, they further argue that the theory overlooks its embedding in the implementation process, masking behavioural differences between individuals or organisational units within the same region or country.

3.2. The “citizen-agent” perspective

Rather than identifying behaviors just as functional responses, some authors have broadened the debate and focused on analyzing frontline professionals’ value judgments toward clients (Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021).

For Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2012), frontline workers are more than rational agents, they are moral subjects. This gives rise to an alternative analytical perspective, the “citizen-agent narrative,” which explains how and why bureaucrats evaluate, classify, and differentiate clients, based on their values, norms, and other cultural elements that influence decision-making. This perspective shifts the emphasis from a “rule-oriented” approach to a “face-oriented” one, in which workers focus more on who people are and how different they perceive them to be from themselves (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Pires & Lotta, 2019; Glyniadaki, 2022).

A well-established debate in street-level bureaucracy studies explores how formal and informal processes of differentiation, judgment, and categorisation shape services and practices (Pires, 2017), converting citizens’ experiences into administrative categories (Moller, 2009). Bureaucrats identify and classify everyday situations based on implicit observations, impres-

sions, and personal perceptions, often guided by common sense, stereotypes, and prejudices (Harrits & Møller, 2013).

In initial encounters, particularly those marked by fear, workers may reduce complex identities to stigmatised forms (Lotta & Oliveira, 2023), sometimes expressed in ethnicised discourse, e.g., “we can expect anything from Africans” or “I don’t trust Turks.” (Dubois, 2023). Categorisation thus often precedes discretion (Møller, 2009) or even arbitrariness, evident in rule ignorance or abuse.

In practice, categorisation has varied effects. The more selective a policy, the greater the risk of perceived injustice, as restrictive access categories shape judgement and can foster differentiation and inequality (Lotta & Costa, 2020), aligning with studies on integration and bordering processes.

3.3. Integration and Bordering Processes

Understanding the ways in which professionals implement policy also sheds light on the process of “everyday bordering” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Critical migration literature highlights that borders are not restricted to geopolitical space but are reproduced internally, making the entire state interior a regulatory zone for immigration control (De Genova, 2013).

In this regard, Lang et al. (2021) advocate for the usefulness of organisational perspectives to understand the processes that shape migratory movements and the inclusion or exclusion of migrants. Migrants face multiple internal, administrative, and social borders, which differentially structure access to rights, producing hierarchies not only between migrants and “natives,” but also among migrants themselves, divided into “skilled” or “unskilled” workers, asylum seekers, refugees, etc. (Anderson, 2013). Consequently, different groups of migrants enjoy varying levels of social rights depending on their legal status, country of origin, and even place of residence (Söhn, 2013).

The concept of “differential inclusion” by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) also highlights how “inclusion” can be subjected to various degrees of subordination, regulation, discrimination, and segmentation. Related to these discussions, Collyer et al. (2020) develop the concept of the “politics of (dis)integration,” reflecting on how the integration or disintegration of migrants depends heavily on state-led categorisation. Some policies not only exclude certain migrants, but may intentionally aim to weaken integration processes or certain aspects of them.

As such, formal categories defined by public policies are reflected in migrants’ eligibility for basic services, benefits, and specific integration support, such as participation in projects funded by certain programmes, constituting criteria that frontline professionals must navigate in their daily practice. Studies also show that some professionals struggle with this “bordering” role and resist it, taking on additional work to meet migrants’ needs (Schweitzer, 2020; Shields et al., 2016; Schmidt & Bhuyan, 2025). Exclusionary practices may coexist with “acts of integration and solidarity” (Schweitzer, 2020). Although much is said about barriers and inequalities, there is a lot of positive discretionary behaviour among professionals, who go beyond what is expected to help (Belabas & Gerrits, 2015).

4. Processes and Practices of Immigrant Integration in Rural or Peripheral Areas

The integration process is inevitably place-based and rooted in the local context and in interactions with local actors (Zhuang, 2023). Given the trend of immigrant flows to rural areas and the transfer of responsibility for settlement and integration to the local level, it is increasingly important to adopt a local perspective to understand how context impacts service provision (Kelly, 2024).

The literature still reveals substantial gaps in the understanding of professional perceptions regarding service provision to newcomers in rural or peripheral contexts. Nevertheless, interest in the relationships between rural areas, policies, and immigrant reception has grown, particularly when addressing issues of rural revitalisation (Zoomers, 2023), as well as the role of the receiving society and its capacity to receive and integrate newcomers, focusing on resources and implementation (Glorius et al., 2021).

Recent studies have also focused on relationships between local and multilevel actors (Jonitz et al., 2024) and the role of local workers. Enbuska (2024) presents the contributions of integration agents to a sense of belonging, and Sampedro and Camarero (2018) highlight the role of social service workers. The complexity of this is also mentioned by Fonseca et al. (2021), who, when analyzing a rural municipality in the Alentejo region of Portugal, argue that the “accommodation of difference” is often conflictual and unbalanced, requiring negotiation and resilience from all actors involved. However, little has yet been explored regarding the conditioning factors that shape the practices and roles that the different professionals tend to assume in the daily lives of immigrant populations.

The issue of resources is a highly emphasized topic in studies in this area. In new rural destinations, structural and resource disadvantages for the immigrant population tend to be more pronounced, as the reduced migratory experience results in the absence of established structures for settlement (McAreavey & Argent, 2018). This disparity stems from the notable scarcity of support infrastructure, both from community organisations and specialist entities (Marrow, 2009). In this context, Sampedro and Camarero (2018) emphasize that, unlike urban contexts where co-ethnic networks typically fill support gaps, in rural areas, social services and local authorities assume a central role in responding to immigrants’ material and emotional needs. In this scenario, Kelly (2024) demonstrates that, with limited resources, professionals’ creative adaptations to bridge service gaps and support immigrants, though helpful, prove to be long-term unsustainable, leading to exhaustion and the inability to address persistent needs.

Although not focusing on practices, Diogo (2024) identifies that local NGOs specialised in migration are perceived as trustworthy by immigrants in rural areas. Being able to rely on formal support increases confidence to move to an unknown and remote location, especially because there is a perception that a smaller region may be easier to obtain documentation, by reducing waiting times, for example. Consequently, Diogo (2024) indicates that service quality and relationships with professionals can represent an attraction factor for these areas.

5. Methodology

Drawing from the literature on migration and public policy, the study employs a multilevel theoretical framework to support an understanding of how individual aspects, institutional structures, and organisational and social contexts shape policy implementation and the individual practices of frontline professionals, related to the process of reception and integration of immigrants.

Adopting a qualitative methodology, the research is embedded in a wider study which includes 20 in-depth interviews with experts and 40 with residents. In this paper, we draw on interviews with 12 frontline professionals, focusing on their intermediary roles regarding migrants' access to services and guidance throughout the integration process. The sample included professionals from both the public and third sectors, covering fields such as healthcare, social services, education, community-based support, intercultural mediation, and employment services. Following fieldwork, key institutions were identified, and professionals were recruited either through email invitations or in person. The interviews addressed participants' socioprofessional background, working conditions, and how their role and activities relate to immigrant populations, focusing on daily challenges, strategies, and perceptions of migration and integration policies.

The sample comprises eight women and four men. Of the participants, eight were Portuguese nationals born in the case study area, three were Portuguese nationals born outside the municipality, and one was of immigrant background. The interviews were conducted primarily in person between October 2024 and July 2025. All interviews were audio-recorded with prior consent from participants, who signed an informed consent form. The interviews were conducted in Portuguese,¹ then transcribed and analysed using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches. Analysis involved systematic coding guided by a predefined multilevel framework (macro, meso, and micro factors influencing practices), while considering emergent themes from professionals' perspectives.

Notably, this study positions professionals in the migration context as research subjects, rather than merely as informants or institutional representatives. Individual narratives, including opinions, challenges, and strategies in working with immigrants, are treated as analytical material. We consider that micro-level stories provide insight into what shapes policy implementation (Borrelli & Trasciani, 2019) and integration processes, an underexplored perspective in migration studies.

6. Frontline Practices in Rural Portugal

The analysis reveals that practices in rural contexts reflect ambivalent roles in the reception and integration of immigrants. Particularly, these roles are fostered and shaped by resource scarcity, and growing tensions surrounding immigration. This reconfigures discretion and moral agency, requiring strategies beyond formal frameworks. When responding to vulnerable situations, particularly during periods of increased social demand linked to the agricultural cycle, labour exploitation, and fragile legal status, professional practices oscillate between

¹ The excerpts presented in this article were subsequently translated into English by the authors.

reinforcing and mitigating bordering processes, highlighting how frontline workers navigate everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).

These practices are explored and interpreted through two main theoretical lenses, street-level bureaucracy and bordering processes, and analysed across four dimensions: 1) structural scarcity and labour precarity; 2) formal and informal mechanisms of intervention; 3) stereotypical representations of immigrants; 3) and cultural and community tensions in the social space.

6.1. Negotiating Structural Scarcity and Labour Precarity of Immigrants

In this rural low-density municipality, whose economy is strongly dependent on agriculture and increasingly reliant on migrant labour, structural conditions permeate everyday professional practice by shaping both challenges and limits of action.

From a positive perspective, some professionals associate the fact that the municipality is small in size with the promotion of closer relations and more personalised assistance: “We live in a small environment and I don’t believe that any other administrative colleague like us, in a large health centre, can do what we do here” (interviewee 3). In parallel, several accounts report tensions regarding immigrant arrivals, shaping service dynamics. Despite this, migration is already recognised as an intrinsic element of local dynamics. As one professional describes:

The nationality from where they come keeps changing [...] but every year we are waiting for people, because now all we see are olive groves and almond trees and grapes [...] The Express comes, suitcases behind, here in the middle of the village. And so, we already see it as a normality. (Interviewee 2)

The steep decline in the population that this municipality, like other territories in the interior, has faced has created a political will to attract new population to the area, even if in practice this results in ambivalence. Indeed, one interviewee referred to an “openness to migrants,” despite the victory of the populist anti-immigration CHEGA party in the last national election in 2025.

Despite this openness and perceived ease of establishing closer relations, the territory encounters structural constraints, including limited institutional infrastructure, scarce resources, and dependency on the district capital for specialised services, namely immigrant regularisation and emergency accommodation, which shapes professionals’ scope of action. One social services professional notes this gap between demand and capacity on the ground:

We don’t have the same type of capacity and response as the cities, the metropolises. We are not yet prepared; this is a small locality, a village in the middle of Alentejo, and we are still not properly prepared and equipped to be able to receive people in an emergency situation. (Interviewee 6)

Emotional responses to this structural scarcity often manifest as frustration and a sense of powerlessness (Lipsky, 2010; Lotta, 2021; Lannutti, 2023), arising as an inevitable outcome of a gap between professional ideals and bureaucratic realities under constrained resources (Lipsky, 2010). As this professional illustrates: “All this work is work that isn’t seen, it’s work that

sometimes leaves us frustrated precisely because of that, because we don't have answers" (Interviewee 6).

The seasonal nature of agriculture compounds this structural fragility as service demand fluctuates with harvest cycles. Temporality of agricultural work thus not only dictates the flows of arrival and departure but also the service dynamics. As explained at a parish council: "it has to do with the work in the fields, which normally, most of them stay two or three months, and then only a few remain here" (Interviewee 4).

During periods of increased demand, professionals reported that their capacity to provide quality support became significantly constrained. As one interviewee described, the volume of people requiring assistance left them feeling "completely overwhelmed," leading to the recognition that "people weren't receiving the attention they deserve, due to the pressure." (Interviewee 4).

From a street-level bureaucracy perspective, the increased demand coupled with resource scarcity reflects what the literature refers to as the "public service gap" (Hupe & Buffat, 2014). Alongside the local economic dynamics, it was identified that periods of high pressure on frontline professionals vary across services. For example, during peak arrival periods, there is an increase in requests for proof of residence, necessary for regularisation, while after the planting and harvest season, there is a rise in unemployment-related support. As a professional from social services reports: "The winter months are the months when they seek our services the most. Why? Because it's in that period that they are left without work" (interviewee 6).

The lack of strategies to integrate workers into other services during periods of lower labour activity, contributes to seasonal unemployment. This is further exacerbated by fragile labour inspection, in the face of situations involving some employers not paying social security contributions or providing formal contracts, thereby limiting access to regularisation and social benefits, while there are also reports of people not being paid. These situations are, at times, disclosed in day-to-day service encounters:

Sometimes they come to make photocopies: "can I pay this much?" And then we say, "but don't you have money?" We start probing a bit to find out the situation. "The boss doesn't pay. I work, work, but he doesn't pay." And that's how we end up finding out. But I think those who come through big mafias are perhaps those who don't speak openly. (Interviewee 5)

Similarly identified in other nearby territories (Estevens et al., 2021), the recurring practice of temporary agencies and informal networks bringing large groups of immigrants without stable or secure support intensified this situation, as illustrated by another professional:

The so-called temporary work companies, from what we know, these networks of human trafficking, where many of them think they have work contracts, but in reality, they don't have work contracts, they don't have contributions [made to social security]. (Interviewee 6)

In response, staff reports providing guidance to safeguard immigrants' rights, thereby extending the scope of the appointment or going beyond formal roles, reflecting a shift from their role as "gatekeepers" to a "broker" role, reducing power asymmetries and enhancing individuals' capacities to engage with policies (Biffi Isla, 2022). As exemplified: "We always advise

them to install the Social Security app on their phones, and the following month when they start working, to check whether they are in fact receiving the contributions” (Interviewee 6). Other strategies to protect immigrants against exploitation included involving the police and making access to services conditional on physical documents, as reported by a health professional:

We stopped registering people without physical documents. Because employers, to have some control over the person, retain their passports. And they would come with the photo on their phone, and we were advised to do registrations only with physical documents. And he says, “Ah, I don’t have them.” “Then who does?” “The boss.” Call the GNR [police/national guard]. (Interviewee 1)

While this strategy to “block” access mobilises institutional procedures to expose and challenge exploitation, it can simultaneously reinforce barriers to basic services, positioning professionals at the intersection of everyday bordering processes (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Mechanisms of differential inclusion are therefore reproduced and reflect tensions between the needs of employers and the role of frontline workers in trying to safeguard migrant rights (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), meaning they are able to work, but remain legally insecure and marginalised. As such, integration and the potential for local demographic revitalisation are compromised. This fragility is aggravated by a persistent contradiction between the structure of services, designed for a “permanent population,” and the reality of the local labour market, which is marked by temporariness and precarious labour.

Everyday borders, encompassing social, legal, institutional, and economic dimensions, are therefore embedded within the structure of the agricultural labour market itself. Given that this is a predominant feature of the municipality’s dynamics, it inevitably shapes the frontline work. Factors associated with labour seasonality and precariousness, fragile legal protection, limited institutional responses, and exploitation networks, clearly increase the complexity and pressure on professional practice. As they need to deal with situations that often exceed their direct sphere of responsibility or established practices, this requires them to adapt intervention mechanisms, often in the absence of a formal policy. In this context, discretionary choices—whom to register, whom to refer, when to call the police—are, in practice, bordering decisions.

6.2. Between Formal and Personal Strategies: Mechanisms of Intervention and Discretionary Practices

Particularly, when identifying immigrants experiencing vulnerability or specific needs, professionals employ a range of intervention mechanisms, reflecting the idea that frontline workers’ behaviour is better understood as pragmatic improvisation rather than mere discretionary policy implementation (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). Some rely on formal coordination between public services and private organizations, engaging community partners (especially religious institutions operating locally), while others pursue informal initiatives, leveraging personal networks and occasionally going beyond their formal duties to provide more immediate assistance. Some professionals reported activating the institutional network established in the territory, based on the approach outlined by the mayor that “doesn’t want anyone sleeping on the street” (Interviewee 6). Another strategy involves holding employers accountable:

A member of the Civil Parish Council went to the supermarket with two [migrants] and bought what he thought was necessary... Then the Council contacted the employer. And they later had to reimburse the Council. But the situation was solved immediately, because it wasn't something that could wait for the next day. (Interviewee 5)

In the absence of specialised support in some surrounding villages and given transport difficulties to the main town centre, immigrants often rely on parish councils for multiple needs, increasing the workload of local technicians. Although aware of the limits of their duties and capacities, technicians attempt to assist driven by a willingness to help, as one interviewee notes:

We only do it because we make an effort to help them, and that's it. ... Sometimes, here we lack the necessary knowledge. We do what we can, but we are not familiar with the bureaucracy involved in legalising them and such procedures. (Interviewee 5)

Professionals also draw on personal networks to provide socio-economic support, demonstrating acts of solidarity (Schweitzer, 2020). Especially in resource-scarce settings, frontline professionals rely on personal networks or informal resources to fill gaps (Kelly, 2024; Belabas & Gerrits, 2015). As one teacher reports: "everything they needed, we tried, within our possibilities, many times even with our own money, to buy medicine, support them, ask for clothes, we kept helping with everything." (interviewee 7).

To engage with immigrants in more vulnerable situations who often fear trafficking networks operating in their communities, professionals also emphasise the need to establish a strong relationship of trust. The fear of deportation and official scrutiny significantly undermines migrants' sense of safety (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). As one mediator reports: "My biggest challenge was persuading them that we were here to help, not to deport or imprison them. Gaining their trust is hard, but now we've made significant progress." (Interviewee 8). Such dynamics underscore the centrality of emotions in bureaucratic encounters (Borrelli, 2018), and establishing trust becomes an essential prerequisite for effective social work (Vandermeerschen et al., 2023).

In these interactional contexts, micro-level factors like professionals' personal values (Borrelli & Trasciani, 2019) significantly shape actions. Empathy was often employed as a resource, as this narrative illustrates:

It's not literally putting yourself in someone else's shoes, but almost. We also have parents, children, and have experienced difficult situations ourselves, even at work. Empathy is key here. Without it, the person won't return, they won't feel welcomed. (Interviewee 9).

Values of justice and care also emerged, as one professional describes pride in the emotional bonds formed with clients while expressing indignation at exploitative conditions:

I got a call yesterday from an Indian man who left three years ago, just checking if I was well. I'm a mother, so I'm emotional. If my daughters were in his position, I'd want someone to help them. Their mistreatment frustrates me, they're exploited and abused. (Interviewee 5)

Sensitive discretionary practice also occurs when there is a mismatch between eligibility criteria and the needs of clients. In Portugal, individuals without residence permits face significant restrictions, such as obtaining a National Health Service number, participating in training programmes, or accessing employment support. Paradoxically, these individuals may also encounter difficulties accessing services at the CLAIM office, particularly those funded by AMIF. Eligibility conflicts may also arise when migrants hold dual citizenship, including citizenship of an EU country. In such cases, professionals adopt strategies to provide access to services despite formal limitations:

Within any plan or action, support is not provided to those with Portuguese or EU citizenship. I can talk about Luso-Venezuelans or Luso-Brazilians, which we often see. They aren't counted in service statistics because they have a citizen card, but I do my best to find work or housing for anyone, regardless of their country, and to provide guidance or support for settling. This goes beyond my formal duties.

This decision to “go beyond” represents a strategic response to discrepancies between formal eligibility, immigrant needs, and local service provision. By navigating formal and informal networks and exercising empathy, professionals in smaller municipalities are able to compensate for resource constraints. However, while such supportive practices enhance operational effectiveness and provide immediate and comprehensive support, they add layers of responsibility for those frontline professionals who are emotionally involved.

6.3. Stereotypical Representations of Immigrants in Practice

Despite solidarity and empathy, practices may be also shaped by stereotypical representations of immigrants, influencing how they are perceived and treated. This perspective connects the street-level bureaucracy and bordering processes literature, particularly through the notion of a face-oriented approach, in which professionals guide their decisions based on perceptions about “who people are.” At the same time, these differential practices intersect with administrative and social borders that differentially structure access to rights, thereby producing and reinforcing hierarchies (Söhn, 2013).

Professionals' narratives reveal that immigrants are differentiated not only according to origin, nationality, or legal status, but also in terms of their profiles, behaviours, and specific needs. The Venezuelan community is seen as having a more entrepreneurial spirit and described as “dear” because “they are legalised, everything is in order” (Interviewee 1). Another differentiation occurs in relation to British retirees: “They come here with peace and love. They come predisposed to give everything they have of what is good in this world” (Interviewee 3). Both immigrant groups are also valued as they are reunified with their families and manage to settle permanently, thus contributing to demographic revitalisation.

Beyond defining eligibility, legal status and nationality dictates the level of professionals' trust, shaping the affective dimensions of bureaucratic practice. Through a “Culture of Disbelief” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), bureaucrats reproduce control and moral judgement, turning encounters into sites of systemic mistrust (Anderson, 2013), a process intensified by political pressures to enforce control. Individuals without residence permits often evoke immediate suspicion among some professionals: “What gives me less sense of security and inspires more distrust is anyone who just passes through ... particularly clandestine individuals, whom we do not know who they are.” (Interviewee 3). Although basic care is reportedly not denied on

the basis of documentation, some professionals describe their role as “policing” when dealing with individuals without residence permits:

I feel like I’m an authority, from any type of GNR [National Guard] or PSP [Police], because when they come here to request the SNS [National Health Service], I have to direct them to AIMA [Portuguese Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum], so they can regularise their situation. (Interviewee 2)

Other national groups, including Moroccans, Indians, and Algerians, were described as being “aggressive” and “untrustworthy” exacerbated by a lack of gender balance: “They live in an isolated world, completely closed, mostly men, with a culture very different from ours.” (Interviewee 7). The identification of this profile was, for some female professionals, associated with feelings of fear. Timorese immigrants were perceived somewhat differently, with shared Catholic practices often facilitating their integration, while limited educational backgrounds and the exclusive use of Tetum continued to pose interactional barriers.

Perceptions and judgments surrounding immigrants’ communication also emerge as a significant factor shaping practices. Some accounts evidenced that barriers to accessing public services are often created and justified due to language: “Usually, people, migrants, go to the service, and if they speak a language other than Portuguese, they are generally not assisted. They are told that it is not handled there and are referred to the CLAIM office.” (Interviewee 9). By shifting responsibility to external services and prolonging resolution, this dynamic appears to transcend mere technical linguistic difficulties to become an exclusionary practice. Language operates here as a gatekeeping mechanism, revealing power relations based on the unequal valuation of linguistic and cultural capital within institutional encounters (Codó, 2008).

Therefore, by differentiating immigrants according to nationality or other traits, these narratives reveal how individual perceptions act as social markers, which shape interpretations and interactions. Intertwined with emotional repertoires, ranging from suspicion to conditional compassion (Jeziorek, 2026), these perceptions promote selective practices based on “deservingness” (Ratzmann & Sahraoui, 2021).

6.4. Cultural and Community Tensions in the Social Space and Professional Responses

The arrival of newcomers at times reactivates grievances linked to territorial inequality, a “fear of falling” further down the “social ladder” and distributive injustice (Gidron & Hall, 2020). Relatedly, it was reported by some professionals that social tension is increasing in the territory, tied to the perception that immigrants are “taking places”: “this rhetoric of ‘you took a house, you took my child’s place at school, you took my place at the health centre,’ creates resistance, and it’s beginning to emerge here” (Interviewee 10).

Migrant demands on services are sometimes perceived as a factor that exceeds the municipality’s structural capacity, negatively affecting residents’ perceptions. Consequently, frontline practice is conditioned by additional layers of pressure driven by cultural and community tensions, particularly when staff must navigate pressures from other residents. As one professional indicates, Portuguese residents frequently report feeling “left behind”:

Sometimes what happens is that local people, nationals, end up waiting longer because of the higher number of migrants. For example, at the tax office it's even worse. There, they need a taxpayer number first for a work contract. So there's an enormous queue. And what happens? Locals feel... they are being left behind because of the foreigners. (Interviewee 4)

In sensitive cases involving religious or community activities, professionals also face local resistance and criticism, caught in a “political crossfire” (Borrelli, 2018). A professional exemplifies this situation: “At the end of Ramadan, they hold a celebration and usually request a space, in this case the sports hall, for prayers and the event. The President has been criticised for authorising it.” (Interviewee 5).

Guided by personal convictions, some professionals maintain that immigrants, as members of the community, have a legitimate right to practice their culture and participate in general activities. In this sense, some take on a facilitator role, guiding them to formally request resources for community activities:

During the municipal sports games, there were over a hundred Timorese who wanted to participate but had no equipment. I told them, “Write a letter to the Civil Parish Council requesting equipment, I'll help.” I wrote the letter, they signed it, I delivered it to the President, and the Council provided equipment for three teams. (Interviewee 5)

To mitigate tensions arising from recent cultural diversification, initiatives were identified in the municipality. One such project is held at the museum, designed to present migrant communities to locals and facilitate understanding:

We introduce foreign communities to the locals. Where do they come from? Why do they now wear a head covering? It helps address the strangeness when 200-300 men dressed differently arrive in a town of 5,000. Who are these men? Where do they come from? Previously, I had neighbours [with names like] Maria and Chico, now I have a house with 50 men who don't speak Portuguese or English. Only a few speak English. (Interviewee 10)

However, challenges were identified in the implementation of this project, particularly in open intercultural activities. In line with previous research, the rise of nationalist populism, migration securitisation, and tighter immigration policies appear to constrict discretionary space, leaving professionals feeling “trapped” between obedience and compassion (Belabas & Gerrits, 2015), highlighting how macro-level political changes translate directly into micro-level adjustments in frontline work. Indeed, the rise of the populist party in the municipality has adversely affected the development and impact of projects aimed at promoting immigrant integration. Those involved were compelled to restrict the scope of their actions and maintain discrete publicity to avoid attention: “Our alternative weekend couldn't really be very wide in scope, because it took place right after the legislative elections [...] And since a political force won in our municipality, everything had to be kept more closed off.” (Interviewee 7).

Despite challenges, professionals acknowledge that, although their work may not really contribute to achieve integration, it plays an important role in introducing immigrants to the

community: “I wouldn’t call it integration. I’d call it presentation. It’s an attempt to ensure the population does not reject newcomers.” (Interviewee 10).

Within this context of social and political transformation in a rural setting, frontline everyday experiences and practices underscore that those professionals are active social actors negotiating a politically charged landscape. Their work involves managing routine tasks alongside emotional repertoires, under pressure from restrictive policies to reshape roles towards control (Yuval-Davis et al., 2019), including the scope of their own work. This reveals the ambivalence of frontline roles, which simultaneously facilitate and constrain access, as they must navigate the interplay between institutional and political structures, moral agency, and affective dimension. Such dynamics are particularly challenging in rural and peripheral areas where experience and resources may be insufficient to meet growing demands (McAreavey & Argent, 2018).

7. Conclusion

This paper aimed to create dialogue between the literature on frontline professionals and migrant integration in new rural or peripheral immigrant destinations. In the area studied here, demographic decline, continued out-migration, economic dependence on seasonal labour, and a sense of abandonment by the central state create the backdrop for the enactment of integration policies. Within this environment of limited resources and services, which are often fragmented in territorial and temporal terms, frontline professionals improvise and develop micro-strategies based on emotional labour and solidarity. The professionals’ accounts demonstrate how their everyday reality is marked by paradoxes: while immigration is seen as essential for the local economy and for countering depopulation, things are more difficult in practice and the dynamics of temporariness and precariousness can lead to exclusion or instability. Professionals find themselves working at the intersection of this contradiction, trying to promote integration in a context that produces impermanence in structural terms. Similarly, this reflects the wider ambivalence of the community toward newcomers who are pitted between the knowledge that the future of the area is reliant on immigrants, to combat demographic decline and act as a replacement population in agriculture, yet there is a sense of fear and loss reflected in the victory of the populist party in the last national elections. Indeed, the narratives of the frontline professionals show how they often become central figures in navigating between the local population who express feelings of left-behindness and immigrants who are struggling to secure their legal status and livelihoods. Thus, practices of professionals in new immigrant destinations are profoundly shaped by the structural and affective dimensions of peripherality.

As such, the role of professionals assumes a dual dimension: on one hand, as agents of mediation and support for immigrants facing immediate difficulties; and on the other, as critical observers of the limits of the local integration model. Their testimonies make clear that the success of migrant policies cannot depend solely on goodwill or local improvisation, but rather on coherent and coordinated strategies that link labour needs with the guarantee of rights and access to essential services.

Despite this, we uncovered ambivalence in how the professionals perceive the demands placed on them by newcomers. Their accounts provide some insight into how discretion might reproduce exclusionary bordering practices. While discretion is more often than not linked with care, stereotypical representations of migrants, language barriers, and informal gatekeeping

practices, it can also reinforce inequality. In short, this analysis makes visible the tensions inherent in a model of immigration based on temporary labour and precarious living conditions, in a territory whose social and institutional structures are designed for permanent populations. Recognising these contradictions is the first step towards building more inclusive, fair, and sustainable integration models capable of transforming the presence of immigrants into a genuine opportunity for revitalisation. Taken together, beyond the Portuguese context, these findings may also be relevant for interpreting similar dynamics in other European areas characterized by comparable socioeconomic and demographic conditions.

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