

Immigrant Integration Governance and Local Development Models in “Left-Behind” Places

Gobernanza de la integración de la población inmigrante y modelos de desarrollo local en el Portugal vaciado

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Amid demographic decline and outmigration from Portugal’s inner territories, local authorities increasingly position international migration as a lever for rural revitalization. Taking a place-based perspective, this paper analyses the emergence of local immigrant integration governance models developed in two diversifying rural municipalities. Based on interviews with 30 local experts, we show how each municipality’s broader development logic shapes subsequent policies, or non-policies, adopted to deal with migration and diversity. Two local contexts are contrasted, one based on a traditional growth model built on agro-industry in the Baixo Alentejo region and another hinged on a model of place branding and rural innovation in the Beira Baixa region. We trace how dependence on external, often EU-funds, generates a mode of “project-driven governance” (Ponzo & Milazzo, 2026) and how local actors navigate instability. Finally, we examine how the rise of political discontent in both areas is reshaping the local politics of migrant integration.



Abstract

En un contexto de declive demográfico y emigración desde los territorios del interior de Portugal, las autoridades locales posicionan cada vez más la migración internacional como una palanca para la revitalización rural. Adoptando una perspectiva de base territorial, este artículo analiza la aparición de modelos locales de gobernanza de la integración de inmigrantes desarrollados en dos municipios rurales en proceso de diversificación. A partir de entrevistas con 30 expertos

locales, mostramos cómo la lógica de desarrollo más amplia de cada municipio condiciona las políticas, o no políticas, adoptadas posteriormente para abordar la migración y la diversidad. Se contrastan dos contextos locales: uno basado en un modelo tradicional de crecimiento asentado en la agroindustria, en la región del Baxio Alentejo, y otro sustentado en un modelo de marca territorial (place branding) e innovación rural, en la región de la Beira Baixa. Analizamos cómo la dependencia de fondos externos, a menudo procedentes de la UE, genera un modo de “gobernanza impulsada por proyectos” (Ponzo y Milazzo, 2026), y cómo los actores locales gestionan esa inestabilidad. Por último, examinamos cómo el auge del descontento político en ambas zonas está reconfigurando la política local de integración de los migrantes.

Integration governance; left-behind areas; projectification; local rural development; rural revitalization

Gobernanza de la integración; zonas rezagadas; projectificación; desarrollo rural local; revitalización rural



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1. Introduction

Across Europe renewed attention has been placed on so-called “left-behind” areas in line with new forms of spatial inequality. In the case of Portugal, its “inner territories” have been long-marked by population loss, ageing, and economic decline. In this context, local authorities have increasingly looked to the potential of migration, whether it be international, return, or internal, as a response to labour shortages as well as a resource for territorial revitalisation (Fonseca, Esteves, & Moreno, 2021). These areas are more often than not portrayed as territories of decline and loss due to the dynamics of emptying. In the current paper, we shift from the perspective of exit to focus on “new” mobility dynamics in line with a trend in the literature to look beyond the metropolitan centres in understanding the local dynamics of migration integration governance (Lacroix & Desille, 2018; Flamant, Fourot, & Healy, 2022; Morén-Alegret & Wladyka, 2020; Lacroix & Michalon, 2025). While much of the “local turn” initially focused on cities, we hope to deepen insight into how “ordinary” or “left-behind” places articulate local integration governance, alongside fragile labour markets, low population densities, decline, and shrinking welfare infrastructures.

This paper asks how local migration and integration governance develops in rural, “left-behind” areas, and how it is articulated with broader local development strategies. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with local actors and experts, we examine two inner municipalities in Portugal with contrasting revitalization strategies—one defined by agro-industrial investment and the other centred on place-branding and rural innovation. We argue that migration and integration governance has developed reactively and is conditioned by local development trajectories rather than stand-alone migration agendas. We further explore how local actors navigate the rise of populist support, instability in funding and changing demographics.

The paper makes two main contributions. First, it engages with the debate on the “local turn,” by shifting the analytical focus from urban centres to rural municipalities, while also linking integration governance with the political economy of local development and responses to wider political discontent. Second, it provides an empirical account of the strategies adopted by local actors to overcome the temporariness of project-based funding and navigate the scarcity of services in low density places. The interview data collected with local experts, policy-makers, service providers and civil society actors demonstrates that they are not passive but often develop pragmatic practices to accommodate newcomers; even in the context of persistent structural constraints and the rise of both new social tensions and political discontent. The paper proceeds with a review of the state of the art, a discussion of the metropolitan bias and a presentation of empirical findings across two municipalities, concluding with broader implications.

2. Diversity-based local development policies

The “local-turn” in migration studies was preceded by an early engagement of scholarship with migration and cities. The origins of scholarship on the migration-city nexus date back to the Chicago School of Sociology in the 1920s. Although its ecological theory—according to which human behaviour is shaped by the natural environment—is now regarded as largely deterministic, the rise of the nation-state and the concomitant focus on the relationship between states and migration meant that, despite this promising start, the migration-city nexus became virtually absent when the field of migration studies consolidated in the aftermath of the Second World War. Yet even during this period, cities played a crucial role in the reception of migrants and refugees (Semelin, 2018; Shaev & Hackett, 2021). The decentralisation reforms of the late 1970s in Europe led to a renewed role for cities in migrant reception. The role of cities as actors in European migration and reception policies was recognised by European institutions from the late 1980s onwards (Payre & Spahic, 2012; Russeil & Healy, 2015). Scholarship caught up somewhat later with this political redistribution of power and resources: at the turn of the millennium, Friedmann and Lehrer’s (1997) analysis of the making of a municipal integration policy in Frankfurt and the seminal volume *Citizenship in European Cities: Immigrants, Local Politics and Integration Policies* (Penninx, Kraal, Martiniello, & Vertovec, 2004) provided migration scholars with ground-breaking empirical studies on the issue.

The “local turn” in migration studies entailed “the discovery of a local dimension of migration and diversity, leading to efforts to give theoretical status to the relationship between specific local settings and local processes, policies, and outcomes” (Caponio et al., 2019, p. 2), drawing attention to the ways in which increasingly entrepreneurial local governments adopt divergent approaches to migrant integration even within the same country (Scholten & Penninx, 2016). A bibliographical review of English-language publications on the migration-city nexus showed that between 1975 and 2018, research on urban-level migration issues expanded far more rapidly than the field of migration studies as a whole, growing roughly 28-fold compared to an eightfold increase in the broader field (Pisarevskaya & Scholten, 2022, p. 764). This growth has been accompanied by the development of a broad range of concepts and empirical studies framed within varied disciplinary and geographical perspectives.

The literature on immigration policymaking in European cities (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2011) has often portrayed city officials and staff as more pragmatic, and thus more competent, in dealing with migration matters (Ahouga, 2018; Bazurli, Caponio, & de Graauw, 2022).

The study of cities that have disengaged from national policies to develop their own positions on refugee and migrant reception and integration (Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p. 976; Oomen, 2020, p. 4) has grown significantly since 2015, when a peak in refugee arrivals to Europe triggered a crisis in EU migration governance. However, migration policies at the city level continue to face structural barriers, as migration remains a sovereign competence of the nation-state within the EU. Consequently, many actions taken by cities are largely symbolic or discursive, and are frequently tied to the branding and positioning strategies of cities that engage with migration issues (see Caponio, 2018; Teixeira, 2020; Desille & Lacroix, 2025).

Cities' interest in migration-based diversity is closely linked to the potential role of migration as a driver of socioeconomic development (Berg & Sigona, 2013; Hoekstra, 2015; Schiller, 2016). In their volume *Locating Migration, Rescaling Cities and Migrants* Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011) connect immigration to urban growth, arguing that cities position and market themselves to attract migrants, who themselves are viewed as neoliberal agents. Indeed, they note that “when it comes to urban studies, the robust literature on the neoliberal remaking, reimagining, and competitive marketing of cities is strangely silent about migration” (ibid., p. 2). Yet, “migration, when considered locally, is part of this global restructuring and reimagining of urban life” (ibid.).

While the “local turn” has been a significant development in migration studies, recent critiques have shown that cities' motives are not always grounded in solidarity, but may also be oriented towards economic growth. Other critiques focus on the scale of analysis: cities have often been studied as self-contained spaces, effectively replacing “methodological nationalism” with “methodological urbanism” (Räuchle & Schmiz, 2019) or “methodological localism” (Filomeno, 2017). Filomeno (2017), from a South American perspective, warned against falling into methodological localism and advocated instead for “a relational mode of explanation, capable of accounting for broader processes that encompass, link and cut across multiple localities, generating interdependencies” (p. 8). We align with this position. Moreover, among the exogenous actors affecting the local level are those who frame the relationship between migration, city, and development through a conventional understanding of economic growth. Within this framework, metropolitan areas with greater resources are better positioned to participate in this dynamic and to attract migrants who contribute to a global capitalist economy.

3. The metropolitan bias: “replacing” non-metropolitan left-behind areas

The literature has largely focused on cities with the financial, human, and institutional resources to drive change. First, it has concentrated on the Global North (Collins, 2011; Natter, 2018; Schmiz et al., 2022). Although intense urbanisation and migration processes have also shaped the Global South, this has not resonated in mainstream migration studies (Lacroix & Desille, 2018; Martiniello, 2013). Second, studies have tended to prioritise capital and gateway cities, creating a knowledge gap regarding small and medium-sized cities (Bloemraad, 2013; Martiniello, 2013; Schmiz et al., 2022). As we noted in a previous publication, “the work of global cities has had the effect ‘to leave most of the world off the map’ (Robinson, 2005, cited after McCann and Ward, 2013, p. 5)” (Desille et al., 2023, p. 136). This bias has been substantiated by Schmiz et al. (2022) with their dataset, showing that the focus of research is on metropolitan cities with 1-5 million inhabitants (Desille et al., 2023).

Glick Schiller and Çağlar (2011) explored the intersection of migration, policymaking, and urban development in what they termed “downscaled cities,” referring to their “relative positioning within emerging national, regional and global hierarchical configurations of power” (2011, p. 191). According to them, downscaled cities also host migrants, who can offset demographic decline and revitalise depressed urban centres, a finding echoed by Walker and Leitner (2011) in the United States. Scholarship has since examined smaller urban settings (Walker & Leitner, 2011; Leitner, 2004; Bonizzoni & Marzorati, 2015; Hinger, Schäfer & Pott, 2016; Glorius, 2017; Lacroix & Desille, 2018; Räuchle & Schmiz, 2019; Flamant, Fourot & Healy, 2022; Morén-Alegret & Wladyka, 2020; Lacroix & Michalon, 2025).

The year 2015, marked by the so-called EU border crisis and challenges in migration management, represents a turning point for European scholarship. Small and mid-sized cities gained visibility as the operational scale for dispersal and forced settlement (Darling & Bauder, 2019, for the UK; Hinger, 2023, for Germany). While this attention reinforced the perception that residence in small cities is often “non-voluntary,” it also spurred research demonstrating that these urban areas can actively compete for migratory resources (Hinger, Schäfer, & Pott, 2016; Pettrachin, 2020; Flamant, Fourot & Healy, 2020), supporting the concept of “ordinary cities” introduced by Robinson (2006).

Consistent with Ambrosini (2014) and Emilsson (2015), Desille (2024) finds that actors influencing cities remain intertwined with national immigration policies. Weak local governance can result in unwelcoming environments for migrants (Emilsson, 2015; Fourot & Healy, 2022) or encourage the adoption of “quick fixes” that are poorly adapted to local conditions (Desille & Lacroix, 2025). Caution is warranted, however, in treating smaller cities as the homogeneous or assimilative counterpart to the diverse and open metropolis. As Bazurli, Caponio and de Graauw (2022, p. 301) observe, “mayors appear especially constrained when they govern immigrant-receiving municipalities that in one way or another are left behind, because they have lost out to globalisation or have fragile, weak or long-declining economies, such as those in post-industrial regions or deprived rural areas.”

The concept of multilevel governance, first introduced by Marks (1996) in the context of EU integration, challenges vertical, state-centred hierarchies, blurs boundaries between state and society, involves interdependent actors across multiple levels of government and non-state organisations, and relies on negotiation and cooperation among all participants (Caponio & Jones-Correa, 2018). This framework has become increasingly influential in both European and North American scholarship on migration policy.

Building on these insights, Desille et al. (2023) drew on Robinson (2005, 2006), Ward (2010), Allen and Cochrane (2010), and McCann and Ward (2013) to move beyond Eurocentric, hierarchical views of urban governance. Robinson (2006) warns against generalising Western-centric urban frameworks. This resonates with the notion of “provincialising cities” (Chakrabarty, 2007) by recognising ordinary urban contexts without categorising or privileging them, as further illustrated by European case studies (Ha & Picker, 2022). These various approaches emphasise cities as dynamic, interconnected, and historically embedded spaces, rather than fixed containers, and argue for understanding migration policymaking as both a local and global socio-spatial and political process (McCann & Ward, 2013). Robinson (2005) conceptualises the city as simultaneously a place—a territorial site—and a set of unbounded, dispersed, and sometimes sprawling activities (p. 763). Oomen (2020) similarly stresses the need to capture the complex interactions among actors and institutions positioned across multiple levels and locations (p. 5). McCann and Ward (2013, p. 6) further caution

that researchers have often neglected the agency of policy actors and the processes through which policies are mobilised within broader contexts.

Methodologically, these perspectives support the use of qualitative and ethnographic approaches, which allow researchers to examine how scales are relationally produced by actors with diverse interests. Well established in human geography and anthropology, these methods provide insight into the multiple scales, sites, actors, and relationships that structure migration governance, both within and beyond the state. Such approaches are particularly relevant today, as the governance of migration and development increasingly occurs through project-based initiatives. Projects thus offer a valuable site for studying multi-scalar arrangements and the interplay of actors, resources, and strategies in shaping migrant integration governance at the local level.

4. Projectified local governance in non-metropolitan areas: the issue of sustainability

Projectification has been hailed as one of the most significant organisational changes in recent times (Sjöblom, 2009). The rise of projectification, that is, the increasing dependence on temporary projects to structure public sector activities—including the local governance of migrant integration—is attributed to several related factors. Scholars point to the rise of project-based techniques in society more generally, which replicates a longer-term trend in the private sector (Munck Af Rosenschöld, 2019; Packendorff & Lindgren, 2014), the rise of New Public Management (Ponzo & Milazzo, 2025; Fred, 2019; Peck, 2012), the context of austerity, and the mechanisms of EU funding (Ponzo & Milazzo, 2026; Büttner & Leopold, 2016; Godenhjelm, Lundin, & Sjöblom, 2015).

The impacts of economic crises and the onset of austerity politics exacerbated the processes mentioned previously with budget reductions being felt more deeply in disadvantaged territories suffering from new social risks (Munck Af Rosenschöld, 2019; Gillespie et al., 2021). Previous research has shown how austerity-oriented reforms to national welfare systems have reshaped conditions at the local level, including the rise of welfare-chauvinist practices that differentiate between gradients of deservingness, often resulting in negative consequences for migrants (Kymlicka, 2015). Financial and social pressures created by the crisis are being shifted from national governments onto municipalities (Peck, 2012), exacerbating decline, marginalisation and rising debt. Moreover, in the context of decentralisation and budget cuts, local institutions have looked increasingly to EU funding, which is mainly distributed through project-based instruments (Büttner & Leopold, 2016). This model has a significant influence on local agendas as they steer organizations to align their objectives with those proposed in the competitive calls (Fred, 2019).

In the area of migrant integration policy, the EU has steered local policy making through the various funds it has launched since the early 2000s, namely the Integration of Third-Country Nationals (INTI) program, the European Integration Fund (EIF), and the Asylum, Integration and Migration Fund (AMIF) (Scholten & Penninx, 2016; Ponzo & Milazzo, 2026). The “local turn” in migrant integration governance mentioned earlier is in many ways financially viable due to project funding for local authorities and non-governmental organizations from these funds that bypasses the national government (Scholten & Penninx, 2016; Ponzo & Milazzo, 2026). As such, these funding mechanisms create conduits between different levels of

government—coined as “vertical transmitters”—that enable EU priorities to descend administrative levels (Sjöblom & Godenhjelm, 2009) and shape local agendas (Godenhjelm, 2023).

There are drawbacks in this process as local institutions may find themselves in the position of “funding hunting” to replace funding cuts (Munck Af Rosenschöld, 2019). In some contexts, especially those where welfare services may be weak, this can create an “innovation trap” (ibid.)—where project-based funding becomes the only viable source of financing for migrant integration, as has been the case in Southern Europe in the aftermath of austerity. As a consequence, projects begin to substitute stable services creating asymmetries in the ability to secure resources and, thus, unevenness across territories and in the protection of vulnerable groups. Moreover, the temporary nature of funding cycles makes it challenging to ensure sustainability after the life of the project. Accordingly, Ponzo and Milazzo (2026) argue that local dependence on EU project-based funding for migrant integration has consequently resulted in “project-driven governance.” As such, dependence on external resources determines the timing of a project, its lifespan and the definition of the problem in line with the parameters of the project call rather than beginning with the problem itself. In this context, the role of “project entrepreneurs” (ibid.) is decisive in securing funding and creating local competitiveness to attract resources.

5. Case Study Context and Methodology

This paper is based on an extended case study methodology as adopted in the Horizon Replace project and focuses on one of the research cycles adopted in the project, namely in-depth interviews with a total of 30 local experts in two case study areas. The sample was gender balanced with equal numbers of males and females. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted an average of 60 minutes. We transcribed recordings *verbatim* and analysed them thematically in NVivo using structured coding. A structured codebook was developed collaboratively by the two authors with both coding the data independently and cross-verifying and discussing the results throughout the coding and writing process. The coding began with a deductive framework derived from the project’s research questions and refined inductively as themes emerged from the data.

The 30 interviews were distributed across the two case study areas, with 14 conducted in a municipal council located in the Baixo Alentejo region (area 1) and 16 in a municipal council located in the Beira Baixa region (area 2). Interviewees were selected through purposive sampling to ensure coverage of the key institutional actors involved in local governance, migration, and integration. In both areas, the sample included representatives from municipal government and local public services (health, education, social security), staff from migrant support structures, civil society and third-sector organisations (local NGOs, cultural associations), and private sector actors directly engaged with migrant labour or local development initiatives. In Area 2, the sample additionally included representatives of social innovation organisations and place-branding initiatives given their particular relevance to the local development trajectory. All interviewees are identified by anonymised codes throughout the paper.

Within the Portuguese taxonomy, the two research settings belong to the administrative category of “inner territories” (in Portuguese, Territórios do Interior). Area 1, in Southern Portugal, is a rural municipality. Its economy relies heavily on agricultural activities. Today, the sector is the most important in terms of employment and, according to data from the Portuguese Office for National Statistics (INE), close to 30% of the workforce is in agriculture, far above

the national average). Drawing on the same source, the population reduced by half between 1960 and 2021 and is ageing—almost 30% of the population is over 65. However, there are new trends with the arrival of migrants driven by agricultural labour demand. Annual data from INE shows that the foreign population increased from 14.9% of the total population in 2021 to around 30.2% in 2025. While almost half of the foreigners are Europeans, there has been a more recent diversification in regions of origin with a decrease in the proportion of Europeans and a significant increase in Asian and African populations.

Area 2 is a border council located east of Portugal, bordering Spain. Population estimates from INE show that between the 1950s and 2021, the council's population decreased four-fold. In the 10 years spanning 2011-2021, the resident population in the municipality registered a population decrease of 14% from 9716 residents to 8355. Newcomers, including agricultural workers (first from Eastern Europe, and nowadays from South-eastern Asia), foreign students from Portuguese-speaking African countries, and European lifestyle migrants have contributed to the diversification of the area's population. According to annual data from INE, in the period between 2021 and 2025, the foreign population in the municipality grew from 5.9% to 13.6% of the total resident population. Europeans represent slightly over half of the migrant population followed by migrants from African countries, Latin America and Asia.

6. Logics of Diversity Policies and Logics of Local Development Policies

Across both inner-territory municipalities, local migrant integration policies have emerged retrospectively, as a response to evolving local development and economic agendas rather than as proactive governance tools. Rather than constituting standalone frameworks, integration measures are generally shaped by, and arguably subordinated to, broader local development strategies aimed at combating economic decline and revitalising the areas. Local variations are nestled under multi-level migration and integration governance structures defined at the national level. Recently the two separate entities of the Border Service (SEF) and the High Commission for Migration (ACM), which focused on integration, merged to form the Agency of Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA), in line with an increasingly restrictive stance toward migration at the national level. These agencies have operated on the ground through a network of Local Migrant Integration Support Centres (CLAIM)—which is a decentralised structure composed of centres created through partnerships with municipalities, civil-society organisations and regional authorities. This AMIF-funded programme offers support at the local level with documentation, access to welfare, employment services, and intercultural mediation.

The arrival of migrants in Area 1 is closely tied to the expansion of the agro-industrial sector—enabled by a neighbouring dam in the early 2000s—and its associated recruitment strategies. National and local political priorities around revitalising the wider region through agro-industrial modernisation fostered a governance logic in which migration and integration were conceived primarily through the lens of labour-market needs. Labour migration, in this case mostly low-skilled or unskilled, was seen as a tool to overcome long-term economic decline.

While this shift has mitigated certain aspects of economic stagnation, it has simultaneously amplified other dimensions of “left-behindness.” Indeed, the growth in demand for labour

could not be met locally given ageing, the lack of workers and the mismatch of young people's skills with the new jobs on offer. As a result, this mismatch created a dependence on migrants distancing the local development trajectory from broader policy goals of retaining or attracting younger residents to return after completing higher education. Interviewees repeatedly spoke of the changes in the composition of the local labour force over time: female workers, who traditionally commuted from neighbouring municipalities, were replaced first by Eastern European circular workers, and more recently by migrants from East Timor, Venezuela and Asian countries. The labour regime itself to a large extent dictated the scale and profile of in-migrants, which in turn shaped integration and migration governance.

Although initial integration practices were shaped by labour demands, the municipality has also cultivated more structured approaches. Drawing on the national institutional architecture of the CLAIM (Local Migrant Integration Support Centre) Network, the municipality negotiated itinerant service provision from the regional capital, while simultaneously developing its own policy actions. The locally designed intercultural project, developed under the Municipal Plan for the Integration of Migrants (PMIM), represents an attempt to coordinate local entities around a shared strategy for migrant inclusion. Two key measures stand out: first, the creation of a Local Interculturality Committee, composed of 14 institutions including public services representatives (Health Centre, Education, IEF, social security and AIMA), police forces, local NGOs, the Catholic Church, and a private company; and second, the creation of an Intercultural Mediation Service. Funded by AMIF, coordinated by the municipality and implemented between 2021 and 2023, the PMIM functioned as a policy and management tool to consolidate dispersed initiatives and provide a formal framework for integration efforts. Yet, despite the inclusion of the intercultural mediator, some local actors contend that it has remained top-down: "we continue managing people's lives without giving them a voice" (PT_1_6).

Beyond migrant-targeted policies, local actors have aimed to integrate migrants through cultural participation in events organised by the Popular University and the Museum. As an example, a long-running project at the museum documents local and other cultures: "we document the other cultures that are here... and this has contributed to their integration" (PT_1_7). A migrant-led dance group formed through this project now includes local residents and supports community building: "There are people from [here], native [...] and this is what we want: for people to understand... If we showcase the different cultures... we start to create connections like this..." (PT_1_7).

Despite these initiatives, challenges remain. The temporalities of migration have shifted from circular intra-European flows to longer-term settlement, creating new pressures on social services. Seasonal and precarious unemployment creates new challenges for social services. Moreover, local actors point to a hierarchy that frames certain migrants as more desirable, namely, families over single men, perceived cultural proximity (Latin American migrants over Asians) and historical ties with East Timor and Brazil, due to their potential for retention and community rejuvenation.

It is easier if they are families, for us it would be better. If it is those groups of single men who come and go practically live in bubbles and don't integrate it is more difficult for us to work with them. It is very complex with Asians, they stay a good part of the year here, but we don't have jobs for them for the whole year. (PT_1_11)

By contrast, Area 2 has articulated a more symbolic model of openness, often encapsulated by the narrative of the municipality as a place to “experiment and live” linked to a broader branding strategy implemented in 2014. As a member of the place marketing team contends: “First, qualify those who are here... and then attract those who bring value to the territory. Not attracting for the sake of attracting, but attracting people who bring innovation, create jobs and wealth” (PT_2_6).

In practice, this aspirational openness translates less into targeted retention efforts. Indeed, while the umbrella branding includes the possibility to “experiment” the territory for a short span of time before moving, it has not translated into concrete support yet. Despite this there are concrete efforts provided by mediation structures (e.g. CLAIM, social radar teams, local projects) particularly towards students from PALOP countries attending local vocational and higher education institutions. Integration governance relies heavily on these mediation structures to incentivise these students to remain in the area after graduation. These efforts appear effective: “From the PALOPs... at least 10 to 15 houses have been sold recently” (PT_2_12).

The development policy in Area 2 is more strongly anchored in social and cultural innovation, operationalised through three major public initiatives, the GeoPark, the Bio-Region, and a UNESCO heritage programme. These projects aim to foster a clear place identity, so to project the territory internationally, attract lifestyle migrants, entrepreneurs related to organic agriculture and leverage cross-border cooperation. Yet interviewees emphasise that while infrastructure has been developed, human capacity and local engagement remain insufficient. For instance, the director of a local public organisation geared towards local development notes that the infrastructure exists, but it lacks people and ideas to fill those platforms: “I don’t see the need for construction work; I see the need for the orchestration of the work.” This is seen as an organisational weakness, as another adds:

My experience in the field tells me that people talk about the need for networked working, but they don’t know how to work in networks. As a result, it doesn’t happen, it isn’t a practice, and it hasn’t been a practice. (PT_2_11)

Another actor, both involved in a cultural institution and in the city council, showed similar concerns for the branding of the area’s cultural heritage: “from the point of view of the built heritage, the great challenge is conservation.” Moreover, he adds:

In addition to being able to turn that asset into something capable of generating returns, creating jobs, and creating conditions for people to settle, we should have no illusions that it will be something capable of bringing in crowds who will take charge of it and stay here to live from it. (PT_2_11)

Indeed, to translate this symbolic policy into actual migration flows, almost all interviews mention three main challenges, which would involve heavier public investments: transport and access to services (public but also commerce); access to housing (with a very limited rental and sale real estate market); and employment (the main employers nowadays being the city council and the Casa da Misericórdia, a network of public institutes in Portugal, which operates homes for the elderly in the municipality).

Non-public actors play a significant role in sustaining social innovation. Organisations contribute to cultural experimentation, sustainable agriculture, eco-construction, and well-being

initiatives. A large festival, in particular, is regarded as a major driver of cultural diversification: “It is such a multicultural space... and it leaves a mark on the territory” (PT_2_7).

These activities also create opportunities for local entrepreneurship—for example, a pastry shop uses local biodiversity to produce regionally branded products showcased internationally.

7. Navigating Project-Based Funding

The governance of migration and integration in both areas has increasingly taken the form of “project-driven governance,” reflecting wider trends in public-sector management, where more temporary and EU-funded initiatives structure local action (Ponzo & Milazzo, 2025). While providing a life-line in the context of reduced funding, as we show here, this creates obstacles in terms of sustainability and continuity. In Area 1, beyond the national framework overseen by AIMA and operationalised locally through the Local Migrant Integration Support Centre (CLAIM), the local PMIM relies on AMIF funding. As the first iteration of the Plan was coming to an end in 2023, the municipality partnered with a Local Action Group to submit a proposal aimed at ensuring continuity. While a few interviewees emphasised that the earlier plan had created dialogue among local institutions and important actions, the new proposal was unsuccessful.

It created a shared space within the partnership to express concerns and perspectives on the territory’s new dynamics. Furthermore, it established a regular meeting point for these entities. Some engage more than others, but it is clear how each one approaches the issue. It is also evident that we do not yet have a common language. (PT_1_6)

The unsuccessful efforts reinforced a widespread perception that rural territories are structurally disadvantaged in competitive funding schemes increasingly designed around urban priorities. As one interviewee notes, there is “a clear concentration on urban centres, with rural areas forgotten about” (PT_1_7).

To preserve mediation capacity, the municipality ultimately signed a protocol with Cáritas—a service for the promotion of Social Action of the Catholic Church in Portugal. Several core components of the locally designed Intercultural Project continued operating after the project formally ended. Local actors saw this as indispensable, given the growing demands associated with new arrivals, but acknowledged the financial burdens it imposed on the municipality.

National institutional reforms have further complicated local implementation. The creation of AIMA in 2024, merging integration functions with migration control, introduced significant uncertainty for both migrants and frontline workers. Interviewees pointed to difficulties in reassuring migrants who associated some services with the new securitization logic that is permeating migration governance at the national level. Within this shifting landscape, the full-time intercultural mediator, funded through AMIF, has emerged as a key figure for maintaining trust and continuity.

The presence of migrants saved the closure of some essential services, namely village schools. This further explains the preference for migrants with a higher incidence of family reunification and long-term settlement in the area, mentioned in the last section: “Those who

come with their family are here to stay. So, it's different. It's a completely different attitude" (PT_1_5).

In Area 2, the sustainability of mediation structures is very constrained. The mediators' programme that employed three cultural mediators for the council until the early 2020s was discontinued. The municipality managed to offer some continuity with the opening of the CLAIM in 2022, re-hiring two of these mediators (PT_2_12). Yet funding discontinuity led to the closing of the structure in 2025.

The educational system has been a notable exception: the presence of foreigners helped maintain daycare and schools open (PT_2_5). However, this new diversity is an additional challenge in a territory already characterised with a high dispersion of schools and a hypermobile educational team. For example, English teachers travel more than half an hour by car every time they switch class.

8. Discontent and Political Distance

The political status quo in Portugal since the 1974 revolution left almost no room for the far-right. However, this has shifted dramatically over the last two election cycles and the rise of the populist Chega party has challenged the two-party system (Almeida & Rodríguez-Pose, 2024). Recent analysis has shown that rural voters are more likely to vote Chega due to the feeling of being politically neglected rather than for economic or cultural reasons (Magalhães & Cancela, 2025). Chega won the national election, with 29,63% of the vote in Area 1 and the second most voted in Area 2 with 26,9% of the vote. At the level of local governance, however, centre left parties retained power in the last local elections.

In Area 1, discontent is manifest in several ways. One point of local frustration underlined by a few of the interviews is related to the perception that revitalisation strategies fail to address other local challenges, such as depopulation, ageing, and youth retention. While economic activity has expanded, several interviewees mentioned the fact that its benefits are not well distributed or anchored within the community. In the words of one interviewee,

The question is to what point the production here ends up effectively staying here... companies would be better accepted by the community here if they felt that the companies contribute in some way also for the quality of life of the community. (PT_1_11)

This sense of misalignment is heightened by the environmental pressures associated with intensive agriculture and a profound transformation of the landscape. One interviewee reflected that "in two decades we moved from one landscape to another... the Alentejo of wheat, fields, and plains... suddenly we have olive trees, almond trees... this causes some disturbance for many people" (PT_1_11). Such environmental and social changes contribute to a perceived loss of sense of place and identity:

People carry these insecurities and are experiencing a feeling of loss... People today feel that the area is losing its identity... They often say that there is no longer any public space. Nothing belongs to them anymore. It's that sense of ownership, nothing is theirs anymore. Everything is changing. (PT_1_5)

The circulation of misinformation through social media amplifies these perceptions, feeding a climate of insecurity. As one participant explained,

The rise of populism... social media is also a complicated factor... There are organised groups, political groups, that benefit greatly from riding the issue of migrants. By mobilising fear... people become afraid... especially in a population that is, by tendency, elderly. (PT_1_6)

Despite this, these insecurities and political narratives converge in grievances that are unrelated with migration but with the retraction of state support. “That’s why Chega is rising in the polls. The entire far right in Europe is rising... mostly due to these policies because... my wife who is sick receives nothing” (PT_1_12). Simultaneously, there is a strong awareness that the future of the area precisely depends on migrants,

There is an increasing lack of workers in operational and essential services... Without the arrival of migrants over the next 10 or 20 years, it will be even more acute... We have a very strong opposition that works against this message. (PT_1_11)

Moreover, strong solidarities were expressed toward migrants and outcry at precarious work and housing conditions, with several interviewees describing the situation of Asian migrants as “almost labour slavery” (PT_1_6) or exploitative as has been noted in other contexts in the same region (Pereira et al., 2021).

In Area 2, discontent is not as evident. Yet, both labour migrants and more privileged migrants were sometimes depicted as (deliberately or not) distant from the local institutions, with a limited contribution to the territory.

In the case of agricultural labour, as in Area 1, which has brought a new workforce from south-eastern Asia in recent years, these statements have been reinforced by the fact that workers are usually recruited by agencies that also manage their housing arrangements:

Ten people sleep in one room; in a three-bedroom flat, eight people sleep, ten people—and all of this, I repeat, this... if you go to [the village], by the petrol station exit, those buildings and all that, you see it there, you see it, I don’t know... all of that... unfortunately, because in the end they are people, and the conditions they are living in, or will end up living in, make no sense... (PT_2_13)

This workforce, mainly masculine, is therefore seen as transient and even impoverished:

Their problem, I don’t know—and I’m speaking without full knowledge and just from the way I see and understand it—is that they receive the money that the companies pay, and the money all goes straight back to their home country, so I don’t know whether they have the capacity, with the little that stays in their pocket, to create any stability. (ibid.)

Another interviewee also pointed to the fact that their capacity to feed into the commercial fabric of the locality was extremely limited. As for their access to public services, both mediation structures and public services (such as health) described their level of contact as limited, and usually made when the situation was already very urgent.

In the case of privileged migration, similar doubts about the inclusion and proximity of these newcomers with local institutions were raised. “And there are people who come to settle in the area looking for a space of their own—secluded, distant, alternative, with minimal interaction. And in fact, it ends up being one of the unknowns, because you don’t really know... Even in the local parishes, their presence is, therefore, limited” (PT_2_11). In several instances, we were reminded that only registered residents could benefit from public service delivery, and that European newcomers seldom identified themselves, or even refused to use public services, with a large tendency towards homeschooling for children, and anti-vax attitudes (PT_2_3). These attitudes, they contend, were prejudicial to the municipal service delivery and budget and represent a point of tension. Two explain that 300 new residents are needed for a public budget boost, a target that would be reachable would new residents actually register:

R: It’s strong. Very strong, because, as we were saying, those who come here are looking for that isolated paradise where all they need is a piece of land, and the rest will sort itself out—there’s no...

R2: ...even the effort to integrate into the existing community.

R: Even to integrate. And that also has an impact on the municipality itself.

R2: On the provision, exactly, on the provision. (PT_2_2)

9. Strategies to Cope with Instability

The literature has highlighted the difficulties posed by multi-level and projectified governance. However, our empirical cases also reveal that challenges, such as a complex constellation of actors, reliance on negotiation and aligning with short funding cycles and agendas, can also become sources of resilience, prompting municipalities to build networks and other adaptive mechanisms. Similarly, private sector and social innovation actions often step in to work toward local development goals.

A clear example of this is the networked collaboration to create joint problem solving and solidarity in tackling issues. One local actor from Area 1 describes this,

From the start, we gained from the existence of a local committee associated with social service provision... several entities come together repeatedly to discuss the main problems and actions to be taken... so there is a sense that entities are not alone in tackling this issue. (PT_1_6).

Local actors also spoke of the importance of maintaining services independently of external financing. For example, the intercultural mediation service was initially funded through AMIF, but when subsequent applications were rejected the municipality ensured that the service continued by offering internal support.

Outsourcing and partnerships with specialized agencies have also been used to compensate for the municipality’s stretched human resources. By engaging the Local Action Group and other organizations, expertise was mobilized to help support project design and applications. One local actor shared how external local experts collaborated on the PIMM, “they worked with us. It allowed us to reach a level of coordination we could not have achieved alone” (PT_1_11).

In the case of Area 2, from the point of view public actors, a soft policy of place branding, based both on natural and cultural heritage assets of the territory (e.g. a GeoPark, available lands and climate for (organic) agriculture, traditional music and instruments) has been an on-going agenda over the last decade. This has been a very effective instrument for the recognition of the territory in international networks, including EU programmes, UNESCO and the bio-regions. At visits paid to the projects included in the municipal branding efforts, we saw numerous plates and logos indicating the variety of EU funds which reached Area 2. Yet, with EU funding obeying the logics of projectified governance, those plates do not necessarily mean that funding will be sustainable in the long run.

Interviews indicate too that international recognition does not necessarily translate into residents' attraction or retention. Here again, the third sector, and social innovation organisations in particular, seems to be much more successful in concretely attracting new comers, one family at a time. Whether or not they are assisted by the more symbolic place branding strategy of the municipality is unclear. For instance, one social innovation project in Area 2 is

Very much focused on the socio-ecological regeneration component... it's 1,700 hectares of land... The project essentially focuses on these three areas of development: not only nature conservation, but also social and cultural development, which in turn result in economic impact in the region. And, therefore, this is the general idea of the project: we have nine people working permanently, and then we have people who work with us on a temporary basis, for a certain period of time, also depending on the seasons of the year, etc., because in some aspects it is not continuous work. [...] In a way, we have managed to retain these nine or twelve people who work here. (PT_2_2)

Another cultural project manager states:

We want, in some way, both within our own team and then by expanding that outwards, to make it possible for people to have more reason to spend more time here, to start settling here in a different way. We already have several colleagues and several people who, in the meantime, have been buying a small piece of land here and who... who are moving here, but with this we also want to be able to establish a larger community here. (PT_2_14)

Interviewees from the private sector too have reiterated the importance to “recruit people from the region” (PT_2_13), as an instrument of dynamization but also, to mitigate the scepticism related to their arrivals. As an almond grower shared with us:

In the end, we're foreigners—I now already feel half Portuguese—but when we first arrived, we were foreigners; we didn't speak the language. In the first few months, of course, you start trying to speak, but when you arrive, it's hard. You get there and what appears is that you're this huge, mega-rich company that's come to destroy the territory, and that hurts a bit. (PT_2_13)

10. Conclusion

This paper examined how migration and integration governance intersect with broader local development strategies in two peripheral Portuguese municipalities. Across three analytical dimensions, namely the embeddedness of integration governance in local development logics,

the vulnerabilities created by projectified governance, and the navigation of rising political discontent, the analysis reveals that rural localities engage with migration not by replicating urban models, but through their own position in multi-scalar governance arrangements and place-specific political economies. This reinforces critiques of both methodological urbanism and the assumption that the “local turn” in migration governance is primarily an urban phenomenon.

We provide some insight into how peripheral places negotiate demographic decline, labour-market pressures and rising political discontent, while simultaneously receiving migrants. Attracting migrants is a clear objective for rural revitalization. The study of peripheral places that are showing the ability to do this, gives us the chance to study the tensions and opportunities in harnessing migration to promote local development. Moreover, the case-studies show the multi-dimensionality of left-behindness or decline and the challenges in crafting transversal policy responses that deal with this complexity. Our findings demonstrate the difficulties in creating synchronous policy responses across dimensions and how improvement in one dimension might actually increase discontent if the benefits are not spread across the whole community or do not engage with core problems important to locals. For example, in Area 1, the long-standing goal to provide young Portuguese residents with the freedom to stay is overridden by the immediate needs of seasonal agribusiness. In Area 2, the narrative of openness embedded in place branding is threatened by a lack of human capital and infrastructural deficits and to a certain degree is dependent on social innovation from the private sector. Certainly, in line with recent work on the rise of the right in rural Portugal, discontent is tied to long-standing perceptions of political neglect, and migration becomes a conduit to channel these grievances. Despite this, in both places our empirical data points to the contradictory or ambivalent position that is occupied by migrants. On the one hand, they are seen as essential to keeping schools and other public services open and providing much needed labour. Yet, on the other they are associated with narratives of threat, illegality and insecurity linked with particular imaginaries of place. In both places, integration and migration governance emerge in response to restructuring. This aligns with recent critiques on the “local turn,” as local migration governance seems to derive from long-term strategies for local economic development: in one case related with agro-industrial investment and in another with place-branding and rural innovation. The nature of the development trajectory is important for understanding how migration and integration governance takes shape.

The drawbacks of “project-driven governance,” as coined by Ponzio and Milazzo (2026), are exemplified by both cases. EU-funded projects have enabled much of the investment to date, in terms of wider local development trajectories and migrant specific-projects, yet temporary financing, and failure in securing proposal funding, has created vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, both places have developed different ways to adapt through inter-institutional networks, sharing services and expertise across different territories, outsourcing, and especially in the case of Area 2, social innovation and the activity of the private sector in attracting people, albeit on a small scale. The governance of migration and integration is very much embedded with place-specific development logics. Moreover, mobilising migration, whether it be low-skilled labour or lifestyle, to enhance rural revitalisation presents challenges for the dignity of migrants themselves and in terms of local political discontent. As such, the negotiation of rural development and the future of migration in ordinary non-metropolitan places cannot be decoupled from the wider community and broader strategies to promote general improvements in liveability. Across Southern Europe, peripheral territories facing demographic decline, labour shortages and shrinking welfare infrastructures turn to migration as a revitalization strategy, often

within a similar funding architecture as examined here. The dynamics we have documented—such as reactive integration governance often overshadowed by private sector needs or development logics, vulnerability to projectified funding cycles and the volatility generated by uneven distributions of the benefits of migration—might resonate in other non-metropolitan contexts. The adaptive strategies, including inter-institutional networks, outsourced expertise and social innovation, developed by local actors in these two municipalities, may provide insight for comparable cases. Nevertheless, the transferability should be considered in light of the study's limitations, namely its focus on a single-country institutional context and on two left-behind places with unique development pathways.

Data Access Statement

The data analysed in this study will be available upon request to the authors in March 2030.

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