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The Capability to Aspire and Realise Aspirations After Exiting Long-lasting Undocumentedness

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the lasting effects of illegalisation and legal status regularisation contribute to the transformation of aspirations of individuals who lived and worked undocumented for years. It investigates whether obtaining legal residence status opens future possibilities, allowing individuals to project themselves more positively, make plans, and realise their aspirations. Drawing on qualitative longitudinal fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2022, this research focuses on individuals who transitioned from undocumented status through the “Operation Papyrus” programme in Geneva, Switzerland. The study analyses the dynamic changes in their situations, difficulties, and aspirations, particularly emphasising occupational mobility. The findings reveal that while regularisation initially expands aspirations, various obstacles often necessitate the readjustment of these aspirations over time. This study provides valuable insights into the complexities of enhancing the capability to aspire among vulnerabilised individuals; it also highlights that while policies expanding formal opportunities bring many benefits, they may not be sufficient alone to increase the capacity of individuals to live according to their aspirations, especially for those who were previously exposed to social contexts that prevented them from projecting themselves positively into the future, such as illegalising policies.


KEYWORDS

Capability to aspire;
aspirations; legal status
regularisation;
undocumented migrants;
imagined futures;
occupational mobility

Introduction

Inequalities exist in how individuals project themselves into the future. Some can confidently anticipate a favourable future due to numerous resources and a history of achievements, while others struggle due to high levels of uncertainty

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and structural constraints. Undocumented migrants, in particular, face significant challenges in envisioning their future (Le Courant 2014; Villegas 2014).

Illegalisation¹ keeps undocumented migrants excluded from social security and the official labour market and constantly under threat of deportation. They are regularly exposed to the risk of losing their jobs and being separated from family and friends. Moreover, they are confined to precarious work positions with limited prospects for occupational mobility (Devillanova, Franco, and Spada 2024; Sánchez-Soto and Singelmann 2017). Restrictive migration policies are sometimes understood as being designed specifically to preclude individuals from envisioning a viable future within a given territory, deter settlement, and promote voluntary departures (Triandafyllidou 2023).

Initially, undocumented migrants may view their stay as temporary, aimed at improving their lives or achieving regularisation. Over time, however, these stays are often extended, leaving individuals trapped by inadequate savings, growing remittance demands, and few legal options, making return impossible (Le Courant 2014). Prolonged illegalisation obscures plans, resulting in vague and constrained aspirations (Le Courant 2014; Villegas 2014).

Regularisation programmes in receiving countries are implemented to manage migration and formalise irregular labour sectors (Chauvin, Garcés-Mascareñas, and Kraler 2013). This paper investigates whether regularisation reopens future possibilities for concerned individuals, enabling positive future projections and realisation of aspirations. While it seems evident that legal status regularisation allows individuals to envision a more positive future by expanding future opportunities and mitigating the threats of deportation and exclusion from the formal labour market, and some studies underline that (Consoli, Burton-Jeangros, and Jackson 2022b; Freitas and Godin 2013; Kraler 2019), the persistence of these positive outlooks over time remains underexplored.

In his work, Sen distinguishes the actual ability to convert rights into tangible outcomes (real opportunities or real freedom) from the mere possession of legal freedom (formal freedom or formal opportunities) (Sen 1992). Regularisation represents an expansion of formal opportunities. A central question is whether individuals can transform these newly gained formal opportunities into real opportunities. While some studies show that regularisation can lead to higher wages and new skills (Amuedo-Dorantes and Bansak 2011; Kossoudji 2016), others emphasise the enduring effects of long-lasting illegalisation and obstacles like language barriers and delayed regularisation (Goldring and Landolt 2022; Hamilton, Patler, and Langer 2021; Molinari, Impicciatore, and Ortensi 2023). These potential obstacles may prevent post-regularisation aspirations from being realised and even lead to the downgrading of these aspirations. Downgrading aspirations after encountering “reality checks” is a well-known process in studying the post-migration integration trajectories of precarious migrant workers

(Boccagni 2017). A similar process could occur for formerly undocumented migrants after regularisation.

This paper analyses how and why aspirations transform or remain the same during regularisation and in the subsequent years. The goal is to elucidate the social processes involved in the transformation of aspirations and explore the nexus between transforming aspirations and individual capacity to live according to aspirations, referred to as “*agency goal achievement*” by Sen (1985).

The study focuses on individuals who transitioned from undocumented status through the “Operation Papyrus” programme in Geneva, Switzerland, which regularised approximately 3,000 unauthorised residents from 2017 to 2018. Drawing on qualitative longitudinal fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2022, the paper examines the dynamic changes in the situations, difficulties, and aspirations of 39 participants. Due to the centrality of occupational aspirations in individuals’ future narratives and imaginations, this paper will focus specifically on occupational aspirations and trajectories.

The paper is structured as follows: section 1 continues to present the theoretical framework, while section 2 details the study’s context and methodology. Section 3 presents empirical findings, highlighting occupational and aspirational transformations after regularisation. Section 4 discusses the nexus between changing opportunities, aspirations, and the capacity to live according to aspirations, concluding with insights on how illegalisation and regularisation policies shape aspirations.

Aspirations and Aspirations Transformation

In this paper, we understand aspirations as per Boccagni’s definition: “emotionally thick representations of what one’s future might and should look like, given the present circumstances and the experience of the past as re-codified from the ‘here-and-now’” (2017, 2). This definition includes the notion of the “perceived feasibility/plausibility” of realising aspirations, aligning more with “realistic aspirations” than “idealistic aspirations” (Salikutluk 2016). These aspirations are essentially the preferred perceived possible outcome to pursue based on an individual’s perceived future opportunities.

Researchers have documented multiple ways in which aspirations can change (Bidart 2019; Boccagni 2017; De Haas 2021; Devillanova, Franco, and Spada 2024; Neale 2021; Stingl 2021): downgrading (for instance, aspiring to open a food truck after initially aspiring to open a restaurant), postponing (prolonging the timeline for achieving an aspiration, such as delaying graduate school to save money), redirecting (changing the focus or nature of the aspiration, such as shifting from prioritising occupational aspirations to prioritising family life), abandoning past aspirations (giving up an aspiration, like giving up on starting a business due to insurmountable barriers), expanding aspirations (for instance, aspiring to open a restaurant after initially aspiring to

open a food truck), and the emergence of new aspirations (developing a new goal of becoming a teacher after discovering a passion for education or new possibilities). Aspirations can be shaped by social processes and can also shape social processes (Mische 2009). Historically, aspirations have been a favoured topic for sociologists studying the creation and maintenance of social inequalities (Bourdieu 1979; Scandone 2018). Aspirations are also known to slowly transform throughout the life course, influenced by factors such as life phase, societal norms, and expectations related to age (De Haas 2021; Nurmi 1992). They can change rapidly during life course transitions or in response to contextual, institutional, or structural changes (Bidart 2019). Encountered obstacles can lead to a downward readaptation to reduce cognitive dissonance (Stingl 2021). Conversely, we can suppose that experiencing the achievement of aspirations can build confidence and trigger the emergence of more ambitious aspirations.

According to the definition we rely on and our interpretation, the (trans)-formation of aspirations is influenced by individuals' perceived future opportunities or "imagined possible futures". These perceived future opportunities are mental constructs rely on available information about future constraints and resources (including future formal opportunities); individuals' perceptions of these factors and their capacities; and projectivity, which is rooted in past experiences and enriched by creativity (Boccagni 2017; Mische 2009). Individuals' ability to imagine their future opportunities accurately is central to transforming formal opportunities into real ones as individuals must be aware of an opportunity's existence to seize it (Flechtner 2017).

The (trans)formation of aspirations is also influenced by preferences. Indeed, once future opportunities are envisioned, individuals choose the outcomes they prefer to pursue. However, when perceived future opportunities are restricted, individual "preferences" might play less significant roles.

While individual creativity, capacities, and preferences may take longer to change due to being part of the habitus (Bourdieu 1979) or requiring interaction with the new context (enriching "lived experience"²), information about future constraints and resources (such as formal opportunities) tends to change more quickly. As soon as new information becomes available, individuals may update their perceived future opportunities, although they still rely on lived experiences which do not include experiences of a new context.

Changing Institutional Context and Aspirations

Social contexts, including institutions, structures, and norms, shape individual aspirations. Institutions contribute to defining opportunity structures by enabling or restricting access to resources and determining how individuals are treated. They can contribute to both emancipation and subordination. This study examines the role of illegalisation and regularisation policies. Two

key concepts are introduced to gain an understanding of the role of institutions in shaping aspirations.

A useful concept is “adaptive preferences”, which refers to the “adjustment of people’s aspirations to feasible possibilities” (Elster 1982, 219). Adaptive preferences are known for the risk of inducing a false sense of satisfaction, leading the oppressed to accept or reproduce injustices without rebelling (Lemay 2020). However, depending on how preferences and aspirations are defined, they can, by definition, be adapted to what is considered feasible. Therefore, Mitchell distinguishes “rational adapted preferences” (for instance, when someone with a health problem adapts their preferences to their situation) from “irrational adaptive preferences shaped by oppressive conditions” (for instance, those that emerge in situations of abuse, exploitation, or systemic discrimination) (2018). When evaluating the capacity of individuals to achieve their genuine aspirations, the presence of aspirations based on adapted/adaptive preferences might be misleading. This issue has been highlighted as a major obstacle when trying to operationalise aspirations in evaluative frameworks based on Sen’s Capability Approach (Burchardt 2009; Flechtner 2017).

The “Capability to Aspire” is another useful concept. Defined as “the capability to project oneself into the future and formulate one’s expectations”, which requires “having the necessary resources to be able to hope to steer one’s own future: resources for participating and acting as well as contesting and challenging the present situation when it needs changing” (Lambert and Vero 2013, 309) and further elaborated by Zimmermann in this special issue (2024), this concept highlights the role of institutions in enabling, facilitating, or hindering individuals to aspire. Indeed, institutions might have the role of providing resources or adequate normative frameworks that enable individuals to perceive plausible certain imaginaries (Zimmermann 2024). In this paper, we will consider that if institutional changes like regularisation lead to expanded or new aspirations, as well as increase the individual capacity to live according to their aspirations, they can be seen as increasing the capability to aspire. Conversely, if aspirations are downgraded or abandoned without being realised, they have to be seen as reducing the capability to aspire.

As discussed above, both the capability to aspire and aspirations themselves are influenced by individual factors (such as perceptions, preferences, and age) while also being deeply embedded in the broader social context (including institutional frameworks, social structures, and cultural norms) (Lambert and Vero 2013; Zimmermann 2024). By adopting a processual approach to studying how the aspirations of undocumented individuals evolve in response to the implementation of a regularisation programme, this study will provide insight into the complex interplay between individual factors and the broader social forces that shape the capability to aspire.

Context of the Study and Methodology

It is estimated that around 76,000 undocumented individuals reside in Switzerland, predominantly in major cities. In Geneva, the undocumented population ranges between 10,000 and 15,000 (Morlok et al. 2016). Despite their status, they have access to certain services, including schooling, initial vocational training, healthcare, and some social insurances, but face significant risks like deportation and fines (Conseil fédéral 2020; Petry 2013; Ruspini 2009).

Operation Papyrus, implemented between 2017 and 2018 in the Canton of Geneva, Switzerland, enabled around 3,000 long-term unauthorised residents to acquire renewable temporary residency permits. Applicants, predominantly Latin American and Filipino women in the domestic sector, as well as men in construction and catering, had to meet criteria like a minimum residency of 10 years, proficiency in the local language, stable income and self-reliance, a clean legal record, and no previous asylum applications. The length of stay requirement was reduced to five years for applicants with school-age children. Permit renewals required maintaining these criteria.

The primary objective of this policy was to regulate the domestic sector, a crucial area of employment for undocumented migrants in Geneva. Concerns about a “pull effect” potentially attracting more irregular migration were addressed by authorities and politicians. Specifically, there was apprehension that individuals might abandon the poorly compensated jobs they held while undocumented, either through upward occupational mobility or reliance on social welfare, leaving behind vacancies and thus inviting new irregular migration. If such occurrences were to unfold, they could jeopardise the prospect of future regularisation endeavours (Ferro-Luzzi et al. 2023). The Operation Papyrus regularisation programme was supplemented by an awareness campaign to inform employers about potential sanctions related to undeclared work and an online job marketplace to facilitate job matching and ensure compliance with minimum wage and employment declarations.

In the context of this regularisation programme, the local government commissioned a policy evaluation to analyse the effects of the policy on the living and working conditions of regularised individuals. The evaluation also assessed the risk of regularised individuals applying for social benefits and the potential for a pull effect (Ferro-Luzzi et al. 2023). In parallel to this commissioned evaluation, a more extensive and independent academic research project was implemented, to which this sub-study belongs. This project, named “Parchemins”, aimed to evaluate the outcomes of the Operation Papyrus regularisation concerning health and well-being of formerly unauthorised residents collecting quantitative and qualitative longitudinal data (Jackson et al. 2019). The quantitative part of the study involved 468

participants, with similar demographics of the undocumented and newly regularised local population (Duvoisin et al. 2023). Findings indicated that despite a few improvements, individuals remained in economic precarity, facing financial instability and housing challenges, with 79% maintaining identical occupational roles (Refle, Burton-Jeangros, and Jackson 2024). No pull effect was observed by the commissioned evaluation (Ferro-Luzzi et al. 2023).

To complement the primarily quantitative focus on measurable outcomes, a qualitative longitudinal fieldwork study was implemented, forming the basis of this research. Qualitative longitudinal research is particularly suited to facilitating a deeper understanding of individuals' subjective and objective processes of adaptation to evolving social structures and institutional contexts. This study incorporated thirty-nine participants previously recruited for the quantitative part of the Parchemins project. Participants were selected to ensure a diverse mix of ages, genders, and family situations. The distribution of participant origins reflected the one of the quantitative sample (Consoli, Burton-Jeangros, and Jackson 2022a).³

Data collection from August 2018 to January 2022 included repeated interviews with the same individuals at ~18-month intervals, with attrition rates corresponding to the quantitative component (Duvoisin et al. 2023). To accommodate participants' comfort and accessibility, interviews were conducted in their chosen locations and in languages with which they were most familiar, such as French, English, or Spanish. A consent form was signed by all the participants, and the study was approved by the local ethics commission.

In repeated interviews, individuals were asked about various aspects of their situation (occupational situation, family life, immediate concerns, future aspirations, and challenges faced) and any notable changes since the last interview. To investigate aspirations, narrative techniques were used. Initially, individuals were asked, "What about the future?" to observe their attitudes toward the future and whether they expressed projects, wishes, plans, or other thoughts. If individuals did not express their plans and projects, they were then asked more specifically about their general life projects and aspirations, and subsequently about their aspirations in different life domains. However, in most cases, this was not necessary. Employing this approach of observing aspirations at multiple real-time points offers a substantial advantage over relying on retrospective reconstructions of aspirations at different time periods. Such a method aims to ensure that any declared aspirations are not influenced by the participants' memory biases and reinterpretation processes. In cases where expanded aspirations or reduced difficulties were detected in follow-up interviews compared to what was previously shared by the same participants, participants were asked to react to

their earlier interviews employing a recursive technique (Neale 2021). This method provided a nuanced understanding of how aspirations evolved over time and the factors influencing these changes.

Aspirations were analysed inductively. In the analysis, only declared aspirations/futures described as probable/plausible by participants were considered aspirations according to the chosen definition (in the interviews, questions were asked to explore the perceived plausibility).

Empirical Findings: Post-Regularisation Occupational-Aspirational Transformations

This section presents the empirical findings based on the analysis of the full set of interviews. The section is organised according to the different phases of occupational-aspirational transformations over time. Each phase includes a general overview, followed by a table presenting three emblematic cases. These cases represent three individuals selected to illustrate the main types of trajectories, and they are consistently tracked across all phases.

Long Lasting Undocumentedness as a Context that Doesn't Enable Individuals to Project Themselves Into a Favorable Future

The initial working situations of the participants corresponded to those typically associated with workers in irregular situations in Geneva, as previously described elsewhere (Jackson et al. 2022). Most of the women were employed in the domestic sector as nannies, elderly assistants, or cleaners, often working for multiple private employers. Men were mostly employed in the construction sector or in restaurants. In both cases, individuals earned meager wages and struggled to defend their working rights.

For most participants, migrating and staying without regularisation were initially perceived as ways to increase opportunities. However, this perception was altered by prolonged exposure to undocumented status and evolving situations.

Observed occupational aspirations after prolonged undocumented stay primarily focused on maintaining employment or their children's future educational and professional opportunities. As highlighted by the cases in Table 1, these occupational aspirations were deeply embedded in life aspirations characterised by difficulties in projecting oneself into the future, feelings of stagnation, and frustration. Additionally, there were often vague and unclear dreams of a probable future in the country of origin, often delayed due to the challenges of the present. Differences in pursued aspirations according to life course phases and family situations were observed and explained in a previous paper based on the first wave of interviews (Consoli Burton-Jeangros, and Jackson 2022a).

Table 1. Long-lasting undocumentedness (before 2017).

Carmela, F, in her 50	<p>Trajectory: Carmela*, in her 50s, works as a cleaner, managing several employers in the domestic sector. Born and raised in Latin America, before relocating to Geneva in the early 2000s around the age of forty, she had worked as a teacher. Intrigued by the potential for new experiences, she accepted an invitation from a relative who secured her a position as a cleaner, a role which afforded her a significantly higher salary than her previous teaching positions in Latin America. This prompted her to prolong her stay and support her mother back in Latin America.</p> <p>Occupational aspirations: Carmela finds herself trapped, struggling to envisage a positive future. She sees her only route as continuing in the domestic sector, overshadowed by concerns of sustainability due to the physical demands of the work and her advancing age. She had hoped to return to Latin America and reunite with her family, but due to a lack of suitable occupational opportunities there, her age, and her lengthy absence, she deems it a distant dream.</p> <p>Other life domains: Carmela struggles with back pain, and concerns about her approaching retirement add another layer to her worries. She is scared of being old and alone. She would like to visit her family in Latin America.</p>
Domenica, F, in her 30s	<p>Trajectory: Approaching her 30s, Domenica is employed as a babysitter and cleaner. In her past, Domenica was a skilled factory worker in Latin America. After getting married and having a child, she had to stop working. Her partner struggled to find employment, and they found themselves in a difficult economic situation. They migrated, leaving their child with a family member. The initial plan was to stay in Switzerland for a short time, save money, and return, but due to unforeseen events, plans changed to settling down in Switzerland and hoping for a legal status regularisation opportunity. During the undocumented stay, she had a second child.</p> <p>Occupational aspirations: Her focus is on providing her children with a professional future, even at the expense of her professional aspirations. She hopes for the regularisation of her residence situation, fearing deportation due to its potential impact on her children's schooling and future professional opportunities.</p> <p>Other life domains: The limited time with her children due to excessive work commitments is a source of distress. The family lives in a small studio, another source of distress.</p>
Leo, M, in his 30s	<p>Trajectory: In his early 30s, Leo is active in the construction sector. Brought up in a middle-class family in Latin America, Leo encountered a professional turning point around his 20s. Faced with a lack of opportunities, he sought a new path abroad, leveraging connections with a family member in Switzerland. Initially planning a brief stay, he found stable employment, which anchored him in Geneva for a decade.</p> <p>Occupational aspirations: Initially content, after more than 10 years of stay, Leo is now frustrated and stagnant, feeling entrapped in overwork and underpayment. He acknowledges the impossibility of advancement without legal status but resists marriage for regularisation. He contemplates relocation, seeking professional and overall life improvement; however, this remains an indefinite plan since securing a job and income every day, being undocumented, occupies his mind.</p> <p>Other life domains: Recurring issues with the lack of a residence permit have complicated multiple romantic relationships.</p>

*Pseudonomization has been applied to protect the identities of the participants.

Expanding Aspirations and/or the Emergence of New Aspirations

The transformation process began even before individuals started to experience regularised life, at the moment they became aware of the possibility of regularising their residence status. During this phase, they perceived regularisation as a

Table 2. Expanding aspirations and/or the emergence of new aspirations (2018–2019).

Carmela, F, in her 50s	<p>Immediate occupational changes: While some employers discontinue work contracts due to the regularisation, Carmela sustains other work contracts and gets hired part-time by a cleaning company.</p> <p>Occupational aspirations: She aims to work until retirement, aspiring to find less physically demanding work, ideally in education, acknowledging the challenges due to her age.</p> <p><i>“One day I’d like to do a French course, and then continue or go to university [...]. Do a specialisation so that I can find a job in my field [education]. I don’t need to be a teacher. Because that’s too much, with my level of French which is rubbish. But I could do something in education here!”.</i></p> <p>Other life domains: She desires more social engagement and to have her skills and contributions recognised and valued.</p>
Domenica, F, in her 30s	<p>Immediate occupational changes: Domenica continues her roles as a babysitter and cleaner in the domestic sector, appreciating the newfound security and entitlements of formal employment.</p> <p>Occupational aspirations: She aims to get out of the domestic sector and transform her occupational situation rapidly by starting a training program. <i>“I hope to carry on working in this part of my life. And then also in the next years, I hope to do my training, a 3-year-long apprenticeship, to become a nursing auxiliary. It could be for the 2019–2020 school year. I hope to have finished my training before my child starts school”.</i></p> <p>Other life domains: She hopes to secure a larger apartment and maintain regular visits to her country of origin.</p>
Leo, M, in his 30s	<p>Immediate occupational changes: He is still a construction worker.</p> <p>Occupational aspirations: Leo aims to find a better job with a higher salary and reasonable hours, and he seeks English proficiency to augment his employability. He envisions the permit unlocking a myriad of opportunities, enhancing his professional upward mobility.</p> <p><i>“Now, if the residence permit came I... I have the opportunity to maybe find an even better work, that pays me even more. I can look for an even better job”.</i></p> <p>Other life domains: Leo aspires to lasting relationships, family, European travels, and his own apartment (during his undocumented period, he lived in an apartment owned by his employer). From his point of view, his professional situation seems to be the key to improving the rest.</p>

promise of future expansion of opportunities, and they began to imagine new possible futures and project themselves into these futures.

As displayed by the extracts in [Table 2](#), first-wave interviews conducted concurrently with or shortly after regularisation revealed that, for most participants, regularisation sparked ambitions to improve their working situations. Most wished to leave precarious work sectors such as cleaning, restaurants, or construction. Participants spent significant amounts of time exploring the new future occupational opportunities opened by regularisation. However, as underlined in a previous study (Consoli, Burton-Jeangros, and Jackson 2022b), the content of these new aspirations varied depending on individual past trajectories, life phases, and family situations.

Regarding the heterogeneity of occupational aspirations, most highly qualified participants started to aspire to find jobs better aligned with their qualifications and past experiences. Due to the selection criteria of the regularisation policy, these participants were often over 50. Living undocumented led to a significant reduction in their professional standing, yet regularisation rekindled hopes of ending their occupational trajectory on a high note, either by returning to their professional practice or, at the very least, working in their fields of expertise to pursue socially recognised and meaningful activities. These aspirations

were not merely wishes but necessities, as acquiring skilled and less physically taxing jobs was essential for envisioning working until retirement, especially considering the strenuous nature of occupations they held during their undocumented stay. However, from the beginning, it was clear for them that advanced age and the devaluation of their human capital due to extended periods of undocumented status would be obstacles. Nevertheless, they held on to the confidence of finding employment in their areas of expertise.

The less qualified and relatively younger participants (in their 30s and 40s) could be divided into two groups. Some started to aspire to undertake training for skilled employment, considering such enhancements vital for achieving upward occupational mobility and fortifying their professional, economic, and social standing. Others aspired to remain within their sector of activity from their undocumented period but sought more specialised, higher-paying roles (the few observed cases were mostly domestic workers from the Philippines) or to launch self-employment ventures (the observed cases were mostly Latin American men working in the construction sector).

Only a few participants did not express expanded occupational post-regularisation aspirations, primarily aiming to maintain employment and avoid exploitation as during their undocumented period. Several reasons can be identified. Firstly, for some, particularly those nearing retirement and lone mothers limited by childcare responsibilities, regularisation did not significantly alter their perceived future employment prospects. In these instances, the absence of an expansion of occupational aspirations was counterbalanced by an intensified emphasis on their children's futures or on retirement projects (Consoli, Burton-Jeangros, and Jackson 2022b). Secondly, future narratives sometimes focused more on expanded international travel opportunities and less on possibilities of occupational upward mobility. This was observed particularly among participants from the Philippines.

Experiencing Regularised Life and Facing Feedback

After the initial subjective transformations, individuals began to accumulate firsthand experiences of regularised life, aiming to transform their newly emerged aspirations into reality.

Participants faced numerous unforeseen challenges that hindered the realisation of their emerging aspirations within the anticipated timeframe. Some obstacles were common across most participants, while others were specific to certain groups based on their individual trajectories and aspirations. [Table 3](#) highlights this phase for the three emblematic cases.

Common obstacles included the lasting effects of past illegalisation. As revealed elsewhere (Consoli 2024), prolonged illegalisation and relegation to informal employment continued to affect individuals' opportunities even after regularisation. Moreover, transitioning to a new legal status was often

Table 3. Experiencing regularised life and facing feedback (2018–2022).

Carmela, F, in her 50s	<p>Post-regularisation occupational trajectory: In W2, Carmela continues to work as a cleaner in a cleaning company and in the domestic sector. The pandemic hampers her ability to secure new jobs, causing financial difficulties. In W3, despite her declining health, Carmela continues to shift between strenuous cleaning tasks and more manageable ones, trying to reduce her working hours while maintaining a survival income level.</p> <p>Main obstacles: Her experience in her country of origin and during her undocumented period is not recognised. Applying for qualified jobs in Switzerland is completely different. Advanced age and not being updated with technologies are obstacles for her. <i>"I think it's a shame for me to get my residence permit so late. At my age. Because I think that for people who are very young, who have just arrived here, if they're lucky enough to get a residence permit oh boy, it's gloria for them. Because they'll find a job because they have opportunities, because they're young. You see? But for people, women and men, who are older, by the time they get a residence permit, it's too late"</i>. Isolation, unstable living conditions, and health issues intensify her struggles.</p>
Domenica, F, in her 30s	<p>Post-regularisation occupational trajectory: From cleaning private houses (W1), in W2, Domenica has found a cleaning position in a company, appreciating the improved salary and working conditions, especially during the pandemic. In W3, Domenica retains her cleaning role and has initiated a French course to facilitate future training. She enjoys better working hours. Positive developments beyond the occupational situation include remarriage, travel, and a move to a larger apartment.</p> <p>Main obstacles: Regularisation triggers many life changes. Between W2 and W3, she faced significant challenges, including experiencing a divorce, other family changes, and enduring financial struggles. She can't access the aspired training, and her French class is not intensive enough. <i>"It depends on my French level. If I learn faster, I'll be able to start the training sooner. But what happens is that I'm working, and I've got the children, I can't take a full-time class because I would not have the time to work, and I have got my family's bills to pay"</i>.</p>
Leo, M, in his 30s	<p>Post-regularisation occupational trajectory: In W2, Leo navigates a brief unemployment spell during the pandemic, which presents a better job opportunity within construction. This better job opportunity enabled him to save money and start his own small company. In W3, Leo is a self-entrepreneur in construction and managed to move into a better apartment.</p> <p>Main obstacles: Losing his job and being jobless for some months during the pandemic (which finally turned out as an opportunity).</p>

accompanied by transition stress, intensified by the temporary and potentially revocable nature of the newly obtained residence permit. Language barriers were a prime example; weak skills in the local language, especially in written form, stemmed from individuals' past relegation to roles not requiring proficiency in the local language. Additionally, the struggle for survival and maintaining employment, coupled with the belief in the temporary nature of their stay, left little room or perceived need for language acquisition during their undocumented period.

Specific obstacles varied across subgroups and depending on the newly emerged aspirations toward which individuals directed their efforts. For the relatively older and more qualified participants aiming to practise their professions again, obstacles included non-recognition of diplomas, over a decade of absence from their professional fields, and intense competition in the labour market. Relatively younger participants aiming to acquire qualifications faced difficulties accessing training programmes. Impediments were not limited

to enrolment fees but also included potential income loss necessitated by reducing or ceasing work to participate in training. Committing to full-time training required reliance on alternative income sources. Childcare obligations, significantly constrained the ability to reduce working hours, convert to part-time employment, or undergo career transitions due to inherent financial instabilities and associated risks. Even accessing brief training programmes, such as the Red Cross's auxiliary health training programme, which required a commitment of 283 h (equivalent to a two-month full-time engagement with subsidies available to cover a significant proportion of enrolment fees since implemented to address care labour force needs in Switzerland) proved challenging. The COVID-19 crisis further disincentivized enrolment in training programmes.

Despite these obstacles, experiencing regularised life also led to improvements in participants' situations. For instance, some managed to reduce the number of their employers, resulting in a more manageable work pace. Others transitioned to corporate employment, maintaining similar roles but gaining the ability to enforce work hours, acquire paid leave, secure social benefits, and arrange retirement provisions. Although these changes were modest compared to the newly emerged aspirations, they represented meaningful improvements in living conditions, granting participants better negotiation leverage with employers.

For a few, the legal status regularisation was the “unblocking” change that enabled them to achieve their new aspirations. These individuals successfully actualised their previously mentioned aspirations without postponements. Specific cases include two Latin American men in their 40s operating in the construction sector who initiated their own enterprises, a Filipino housekeeper woman who aspired to specialise and secure employment with wealthier employers offering superior salaries, and a Latin American man who, supported by temporary social welfare reliance during the COVID-19 pandemic, enrolled in a Red Cross training programme advised by a social worker. What they had in common was their pursuit of upward mobility within their existing professional realms, preferring to specialise or pursue entrepreneurial endeavours in domains they were familiar with during their undocumented stay, thus avoiding the lasting consequences of not having practised one profession during their undocumented period. An important resource for some of them, was the possibility of accessing temporary alternative income sources. For instance, one of the men who started his own company went through a short period of unemployment during the pandemic, which enabled him to find a job with improved conditions, subsequently allowing him to launch his venture. Moreover, these participants who did not encounter major obstacles were participants without any significant disadvantages other than having experienced long-lasting illegalisation. These participants were typically in good health and did not have to assume childcare responsibilities.

This phase is where most of the inequalities emerged. The difference in feedback from experiencing regularised life—or “reality checks” (Boccagni 2017) – varied significantly. For some, regularised life opened fewer opportunities than anticipated, while for others, it opened more. For instance, not all participants felt able to take the risk of seeking better employment and transitioning briefly to unemployment, as this could jeopardise the renewal of their permit. This risk varied depending on whether it concerned only the individual or also their children.

Readapting Aspirations to the New Context

Throughout the previous phase of firsthand experience with regularised life, participants experienced a processual adaptation of their aspirations to the new context and available information. This is not, in itself, a phase but rather corresponds to the subjective process occurring simultaneously with the more objective process described in the previous phase.

In most cases, this involved a downward readjustment of the newly emerged or expanded aspirations (although they remained higher than those set during their undocumented phase). For a few individuals, however, it resulted in an upward readjustment.

On the one hand, skilled and older participants, confronted with unfulfilled aspirations and limited time to seize new formal opportunities to improve their professional situations, refocused their life aspirations toward non-professional pursuits to cope with frustration. They began to aspire to engage in volunteer work, hobbies, travels, or new projects while working as much as their health permitted to “survive”. These aspirations were mostly second-choice aspirations, necessitating the abandonment of the new aspirations that regularisation had triggered three years earlier.

On the other hand, younger participants who aimed to engage in training and acquire diplomas often deferred their aspirations, thereby prolonging the timeline to realise their aspirations. Nonetheless, most of them did not perceive the inability to commence training or secure improved employment in the initial years following regularisation as a significant setback. Firstly, participants maintained a belief that ample opportunities for progress and advancement remained accessible, and thus, delaying the achievement of aspirations did not equate to abandoning them. Secondly, attributing the delay to the pandemic provided a level of solace, rendering the postponement more acceptable. Thirdly, even with only modest advancements in their occupational trajectories, participants often acknowledged that minor improvements, such as the stability afforded by formal employment contracts, offered a greater sense of security and peace than initially anticipated. However, in addition to postponing, they often downgraded their newly emerged aspirations, sometimes abandoning their personal aspirations for upward occupational mobility. Instead, they redirected their aspirations toward the new educational and

Table 4. Readapting aspirations to the new context (2018–2022).

Carmela, F, in her 50s	<p>Occupational aspirations: In W2, she relinquishes her hope for skilled employment, focusing on more manageable office cleaning roles, with aspirations to secure a minimal pension by retirement. She still envisions working until retirement age. <i>"I was disappointed [...]. Before I thought, 'ah if I had a residence permit I could get a good job with the government, in a bank, in a school, earn very well'. It's all an illusion (she laughs)! [...] Well, forget it. That's life, that's the way it is. You mustn't dream too much (she laughs). I don't dream too much. Now I say 'no'. I don't have any more fantasies in my head, with things coming [in the future] [...]. I accept it, it's good. It's better than nothing. [...]"</i> In W3, nearing the age of sixty, she aims to work a few more years to avoid a severely reduced pension, but due to her health issues, working until the official retirement age seems unattainable. <i>"... Because retirement, maybe I'll even ask for it before. Because, as I've worked for ... [...]. I've already noticed that my body is tired, my head, everything. I have to work, but not as much as before. Just a bit"</i>. She had dreamed of finding a less tiring job, but, she tells herself it is really unrealistic.</p> <p>Other life domains: In W3, Carmela hopes to explore academic interests and hobbies during retirement and express her unmet need to travel and visit her family due to financial limitations.</p> <p>TYPE: "Expansion and downward readaptation: frustration"</p>
Domenica, F, in her 30s	<p>Occupational aspirations: In W2, she is hopeful about in-house cleaning training opportunities (external training is not accessible to her). She still aims to train as a nursing auxiliary but recognises the financial and linguistic challenges ahead. In W3, she maintains her aspiration to become a nursing auxiliary, balancing her immediate obligations with her long-term goals, and she is committed to achieving her nursing auxiliary title before turning 40 (she is still in her early 30s). <i>"Therefore, I said to myself, slowly, slowly, everything needs time, let's choose a realistic goal that I can achieve. [...] In my head, before I'm 40, I have to have my nursing auxiliary title. So, we'll say, there's still more than five years to go, I've got plenty of time"</i>.</p> <p>Other life domains: She has seen improvements in other areas of her life.</p> <p>TYPE: "Expansion and postponement"</p>
Leo, M, in his 30s	<p>Occupational aspirations: In W2, fulfilling his earlier aspirations, he aims to launch his construction business within a year. In W3, he envisions business expansion, intending to provide employment to others. <i>"I've started working for myself, we've already hired one person, my dream next year is to hire another two, three, four, five at the most. [...] It's like a chain. [...] For me, every day allows me to see different challenges. It allows me to go further"</i>.</p> <p>Other life domains: In W2, he is finding more stability in relationships; however, his career leaves him little time for relationships. Nevertheless, he managed to do some travelling abroad. In W3, the situation is similar.</p> <p>TYPE: "Expansion, realisation, and further expansion"</p>

occupational prospects available to their children in a regularised setting, similar to what they aspired to during their undocumented phase.

Regarding those who did realise their aspirations, they expanded their goals further as they achieved their initial newly emerged aspirations. For them, the direct experience of living in a regularised situation matched or even exceeded the expected increase in opportunities.

As specified in Table 4, three main trajectories were identified: (1) Expansion and downward readaptation: frustration; (2) Expansion and postponement; (3) Expansion, realisation, and further expansion.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to analyse how illegalisation and regularisation policies contribute to shaping the aspirations of newly regularised residents, shedding light on the social processes involved in this transformation. Consistent with existing literature (Le Courant 2014; Villegas 2014), our findings confirm the difficulties undocumented individuals face in projecting themselves into the future. Our research aligns with literature showing that the announcement of potential legal status regularisation led individuals to anticipate more favourable occupational scenarios and form more ambitious aspirations, including upward occupational mobility (Freitas and Godin 2013; Consoli, Burton-Jeangros, and Jackson 2022a).

However, follow-up processual longitudinal analysis revealed that expanded aspirations were enduring or continually expanding for only a few individuals. For most, this expansion was transient. This dynamic resulted in trajectories characterised by initial low aspirations (during undocumentedness), followed by expansion, and then downward readaptation, as seen in the trajectories labelled “expansion and downward readaptation: frustration” and “expansion and postponement” (where the downward readaptation was mostly a recalibration of time horizons). The observed development is similar to what Boccagni described for domestic workers in a regular situation (2017). Previously undocumented migrants may have gone through this experience twice, once in the post-migration phase and again in the post-regularisation phase.

This evolution can be understood by examining the temporal dynamics of adaptation and the discrepancies among subprocesses that shape aspiration formation and transformation. We identified that aspirations are shaped by individual perceptions of future opportunities, individual projectivity, and individual preferences. These components change at different rates. The initial expansion of occupational aspirations for most participants was triggered by the information of future formal opportunity expansion and generated imagined opportunities based on indirect experiences and socialisation, rather than firsthand subjective experience of regularised life in Switzerland. As individuals began to directly experience regularised life and interact with new contexts, they received feedback on the feasibility of their newly emerged aspirations. For most, unforeseen obstacles such as inadequate language proficiency, advanced age, insufficient income for training, and the precariousness of the newly obtained permit became evident. These obstacles are consistent with findings from the quantitative part of the Parchemins study (Ferro-Luzzi et al. 2023) and existing literature highlighting barriers to upward occupational mobility in post-migration trajectories (Goldring and Landolt 2022; Hamilton, Patler, and Langer 2021; Molinari, Impicciatore, and Ortensi 2023). During undocumentedness, there was a reduction of possibilities over time, which often transformed a “chosen” mobility project into a situation of “stuckness”,

and this situation persisted for most, even after regularisation. The experience of life after regularisation went hand-in-hand with the realisation of what would never be achieved.

Individuals demonstrated resilience by redirecting their priorities toward aspirations in other life domains, such as abandoning the aspiration for upward professional mobility in favour of family, community, or leisure aspirations, which they initially designated as secondary priorities. Others prolonged their aspirations' time horizon. These new aspirations still express individuals' agency, albeit in a relatively more constrained context than the anticipated one. While adaptation is a phenomenon known to every human being, individuals in subordinate positions have to adapt more often. Adaptation comes at a cost: individuals grieve for the imagined futures they initially had considered achievable but later realised were out of reach.

Interestingly, for some individuals, newly emerged occupational aspirations remained stable or continued to expand, suggesting that, at least for them, regularisation allowed for a sustained increase in the capability to aspire. These individuals continued to evaluate their newly emerged aspirations as plausible and desirable even after adding regularised life to their lived experience and reevaluating their aspirations. For some, the experience of regularised life even enabled them to further expand their imaginations and aspirations. This resulted in an observed aspirational trajectory that progressed from low aspirations (during undocumentedness) to more ambitious aspirations and even to higher aspirations; we labelled this trajectory "expansion, realisation, and further expansion". This development and the previous one suggest a strong link between sustained expanded aspirations and a higher individual capacity to live according to their aspirations (*agency goal achievement*). Indeed, if a new level of aspirations was not accompanied by concrete achievements or ongoing feedback confirming their feasibility, the aspiration expansion remained a fleeting phenomenon and did not last over time. Further research should investigate this relationship and whether it holds in cases where individuals are not initially in subordinate positions with adaptive preferences as illegalised residents. This research could enrich the debate on the relevance and challenges of incorporating aspirations into evaluative frameworks inspired by Amartya Sen's Capability approach (Burchardt 2009; Conradie and Robeyns 2013; Flechtner 2017).

Findings underline that not all individuals benefit equally from an expansion in formal opportunities, including regularisation programmes. The social/institutional context that can sufficiently enhance some individuals' aspirations and capability to aspire might be insufficient for others. Certain groups, particularly women with young children, encounter heightened challenges and barriers in reshaping their occupational trajectories. Experiences of post-regularisation aspiration downgrading were influenced by individuals' life stages. Younger participants often tempered their expectations and postponed their goals, while

older individuals more frequently expressed frustration, as regularisation came too late in their life course. The regularisation's increasing effects on the capability to aspire were observed for individuals who were less disadvantaged by long-lasting illegalisation, who were still relatively young, and who had occupational aspirations compatible with those of the regularisation programme (remaining in the same working sector). As individuals began to experience regularised life, interact with peers and institutions, seek a new job or reflect on starting training, differences in past trajectories and accumulated experiences, and individual parameters including age, family situation and life stage, became more relevant, mediating how newly obtained formal opportunities could be transformed into real opportunities. This highlights that those aspects (past trajectories and experiences and individual parameters that might mediate how an institutional change affects one's situation) should be considered so that transformations in the capability to aspire resulting from an institutional change can be understood. Hart (2016) and Burchardt have highlighted the importance of considering "the freedom (or lack of it) an individual has accumulated over his or her lifetime to date" (2009, 17).

This study highlights the peculiarity of studying aspirations processually, including "at the tipping point". These liminal moments (like when regularisation is announced but still not experienced) when everything seems possible, even with low certainty, are favourable for observing less adaptive aspirations. Indeed, one criterion for establishing whether a preference is adaptive is that this preference (or aspiration) would change if the real opportunity to change it were given (Khader 2013; Lemay 2020). For most, aspirations peaked during this moment but then decreased, which suggests that aspirations were adaptive not only during undocumentedness, but also remained adaptive during regularised life. For the few individuals whose aspirations continued expanding, it is at least evident that their newly developed aspirations were less adaptive than those formed during their undocumented period. This finding suggests that an expanded aspirational level that lasts over time or continues to grow after an institutional expansion of formal opportunities not only indicates a context that enables greater capability to aspire and more agency-goal achievement but also reflects less adaptation of aspirations.

Considering all this, regularisation after years of illegalisation appears as an institutional change that, in itself, is insufficient to enable individuals to live more according to their aspirations or to end the adaptation of aspirations to a subordinate position. While improvements occurred, for most, these remain minimal when considering individuals' aspirations and the significant emotional labour of mourning unrealisable aspirations in post-regularisation life. Although the regularisation programme was considered a success from the perspective of its goals—improving labour conditions and deterring a "pull effect"—without accompanying measures to compensate for the long-lasting consequences of illegalisation, regularisation did not fundamentally

alter individual structural position. Individuals were, of course, more positive about their future than during their undocumented period; not being subject to deportation enabled them to look more favourably toward their future. However, this shift represents merely the end of a prolonged period during which illegalisation retained individuals in a situation in which it was difficult to project themselves into the future, rather than the beginning of a process where individuals were genuinely enabled to express their aspirations and encouraged shaping their lives according to their aspirations. This increase in liberty envisaged as absence of constraints should not be mistaken for an increased capability to aspire, which is more comparable to an increase in agency-goal achievement.

Overall, this paper provides valuable insights into how changes in the institutional context contribute (or not) to the transformation of individuals' aspirations and capability to aspire. By focusing on occupational aspirations as a central element in the post-regularisation narratives of individuals, we highlighted the dynamic nature of aspirations and the critical role of institutional support in shaping them. Future research should expand on these findings to include aspirations in other life domains, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the aspirational landscape of newly regularised individuals. Additionally, longer follow-up studies could provide deeper insights into the lasting effects of regularisation on aspirations and the development of new converting factors. Moreover, more research is needed on the factors that differentiate post-regularisation aspirational and occupational trajectories. While we reached saturation for Latin American participants with trajectories of expansion and downward readaptation or postponement of occupational aspirations, results for other categories – including individuals of other origins or those who prioritise other types of life aspirations – remain preliminary.

Despite being an exploratory finding, the expanding aspirational trajectory of some individuals underscores the potential for institutional context to significantly enhance the capability to aspire, at least in some cases. This finding highlights the need to further develop this kind of research to better understand all the processes and mechanisms that play a role in the inequalities in individuals' capacity to shape their lives according to their aspirations.

Notes

1. The term “illegalisation” was chosen to “draw attention to the institutional and political processes rendering people illegal” (Bauder 2014, 327).
2. See Zimmermann (2024) for a description of “lived experience” in relation to aspirations.
3. A table detailing the participants' characteristics is available in the supplementary materials.

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Data availability statement

Due to the nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Ethics Committee of Geneva Canton, Switzerland (CCER 2017–00897). The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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Liala Consoli is currently working as a research associate at the University of Geneva (Switzerland). In 2024, she defended a doctoral thesis in sociology focused on the post-regularization life trajectories of individuals who had lived and worked undocumented for years, with an emphasis on the dynamics of aspirations and vulnerabilities, employing longitudinal qualitative methods. Additionally, she has contributed to various research projects on vulnerability, inequalities, and social policies.

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