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Rural Aspirations: Reflections for Development Planning, Design and Localized Effects

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Abstract

In this editorial introduction to the *Special Issue “Rural aspirations—Livelihood decisions and rural development trajectories”*, we outline current views on aspirations and their relevance for development research, projects and approaches. Using several examples from Africa, we outline how the combination of the different theoretical perspectives, case studies and regional backgrounds provides deeper insights about the role of aspirations in shaping rural areas. The distinct entry points of the ‘bottom up’ local aspirations for future lives, the ‘top down’ aspirations as visions for change, and the process of negotiating between these provide novel insights into directions for development action as well as for future research in the field of aspirations in the development arena.

Keywords Rural development · Livelihood strategies · Choices · Participation · Development projects

Résumé

Dans l’éditorial de ce numéro spécial intitulé «Aspirations rurales – Les décisions relatives aux moyens de subsistance et les trajectoires de développement rural», nous mettons en lumière des points de vue actuels concernant les aspirations et leur

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pertinence pour la recherche sur le développement ainsi que pour les projets et les approches de développement. Nous nous appuyons sur plusieurs exemples, principalement en Afrique, pour décrire la façon dont la combinaison des différentes perspectives théoriques, des études de cas et des contextes régionaux permet de mieux comprendre le rôle que jouent les aspirations dans le façonnement des zones rurales. Les éléments suivants apportent de nouvelles perspectives pour orienter l'action de développement ainsi que pour les études à venir au sujet des aspirations dans le domaine du développement : les points d'entrée bien distincts des aspirations locales "ascendantes" en matière d'avenir, des aspirations "descendantes" en tant que visions en matière de changement et le processus de négociation entre celles-ci.

Introduction

Supporting rural populations in developing countries in raising their standard of living often centres on agricultural interventions. Standard approaches to targeting and disseminating such interventions have worked in some contexts but not in others, with overall success below expectations (Jerneck and Olsson 2013; Spielman and Smale 2017). Recent work has highlighted how increasing the impact of such development interventions requires a sophisticated understanding of the social and psychodynamic drivers of behaviour. In particular, such work has established the importance of a better understanding of how people's decisions are channelled by their wants and dreams and how these in turn are shaped by socio-economic factors and group identities (Kremer et al. 2019; World Bank 2015).

In this context, understanding how people live, and more importantly, how they would like to live should be a key point of departure in any effort to support improvement of their livelihoods, yet discussion of the aspirations of rural people has been under-represented in development practice. This is despite the fact that aspirations can have profound implications for individual behaviour; and in recent research aspirations have been shown to be important in decision making and in the shaping of rural income portfolios (Kosec and Mo 2017; Mausch et al. 2018; Verkaart et al. 2018; Okello et al. 2019). Aspirations as a scientific concept are used in different scholarly discussions in the context of poverty, economic development and cultural determinants that are influencing futures and livelihoods (Appadurai 2004; Bernard and Taffesse 2014; Ray 2006; Besley 2017; Iqani 2017). The close link to poverty is depicted in the discussion around the evaluation of the 'strategies of the poor' (Dalton et al. 2016; Dorward 2009; Dorward et al. 2009; Ray 2006), the idea of the cultural boundedness of concepts of future (Appadurai 2013) and the 'empowerment of the poor' (Appadurai 2004). Poverty is seen in all cases as a condition that reaches far beyond "material deprivation and desperation. It is lack of security and dignity. It is exposure to risk and high costs for thin comforts. It is inequality materialized. It diminishes its victims" (Appadurai 2004, p. 64). Furthermore, aspirations have both individual and collective dimensions which interact (Hart 2015). Uncertainties and vulnerabilities affect the formation of aspirations along both dimensions and are therefore tied to the local conditions (Dorward et al. 2009).



Here aspirations have to be considered both in terms of direction as well as of degree. Bernard and Taffesse (2014, 198f.) portray aspirations as being future-oriented, as being motivators, and as being perceived as an ambition to reach a multi-dimensional life outcome (*ibid.*). This illustrates very well that aspirations are a suitable tool to study the impact of actors' future-oriented and culturally, socially as well as economically informed considerations, influenced by past experience, on today's livelihood decision making. Furthermore, in the context of livelihood portfolios, it is important to understand the directionality of aspirations in order to improve the match between support offerings and the trajectories envisioned by the people they are targeting (Mausch, et al. 2018). This is to understand the life goals and ambitions of rural people and the way in which development initiatives could align and work with the grain of these aspirations. Consequent improvements in the dissemination and uptake of developmental initiatives, activities and technologies could have a positive effect on the lives of rural people in Africa.

This Special Issue collates an array of different approaches for understanding aspirations as one of the basic drivers of behaviour within rural households and communities against the backdrop of current modes of development and specific developmental initiatives. It highlights the breadth of disciplinary entry points and methods and thereby enables cross-learning to improve the application of the concept. This increased understanding should improve the ability of governments and development agencies to support and improve rural livelihoods, be it through farming or through other activities.

Conceptual Approach

“Our future-oriented actions shape our relationships with the present and how we choose to selectively archive our past” (Bryant and Knight 2019).

The variety of theoretical and disciplinary entry points covered within this Special Issue share a common basic definition of aspirations as desired futures—much in line with Huijsmans et al. (2020). These desired futures are not only shaped by individual preferences and life goals but are distinctly moderated by social and institutional circumstances (Hart 2015). As Bennike et al. (2020) point out “aspirations are conditioned by constellations of power, which shape what can be done and what can be imagined”. This Special Issue extends beyond previous work in the combining of two distinct lines of enquiry that have so far not been explicitly joined. In most research, aspirations are seen as individual future states moderated by circumstances while the key drivers of which have not been understood.

Nation states, often together with international organizations, are guided by visions of desirable futures and use top-down policy instruments such as large infrastructure projects to enhance development. In contrast to such political aspirations of development (Appadurai 2013) and the “dreamscapes of modernity” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015) many of the large infrastructure projects of the 1960s and 1970s in Africa met fierce criticism (Mold 2012; Chang 2002). In a critical



assessment, Mold (2012) gives ample evidence that many projects were neither sustainable nor catalytic for economic development. Nevertheless, large infrastructure projects such as growth corridors are currently experiencing a comeback. With the help of international donors and investors, more than 30 growth corridors are currently being developed or planned throughout Africa (Nel and Rogerson 2016).

Assembling these two lines of research, i.e. the focus on individual life goals and the aspirational politics of development progress, within one Special Issue offers novel insights into the interconnectedness of political aspirations as visions for development and those of individuals as visions for future lives (see Fig. 1). This often plays out within the context of large development initiatives such as the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT). This is especially important in overcoming an often encountered overemphasis on the “individualistic properties of aspirations” (Bennike et al. 2020, p. 46). Highlighting the interplay between individual local aspirations and institutional and political aspirations that shape them will likely be more successful in connecting individuals with their context and vice versa to work towards common aspirations or negotiate trade-offs across scales and individuals. Here we assume that political decisions that work in line with local aspirations would ultimately be more successful for both local individual progress as well as for political success as measured in votes. Therefore, in this Special Issue, aspirations are not purely seen as “an individual preference, rather aspirations are understood as social in nature in that they are embedded and shaped by the materiality, practices, discourses and beliefs of a culture” (Dilley et al. 2021). Within this context, the “thick of social life” (Appadurai 2004, p. 67) applies just as well to politicians and development actors as it does to individual decision makers.

We argue that through this broader view of aspirations, it may be possible to overcome Huijsmans et al. (2020)’s “critique of development interventions” attempt to raise aspirations in efforts to promote progress. Frye (2019) also argues that the

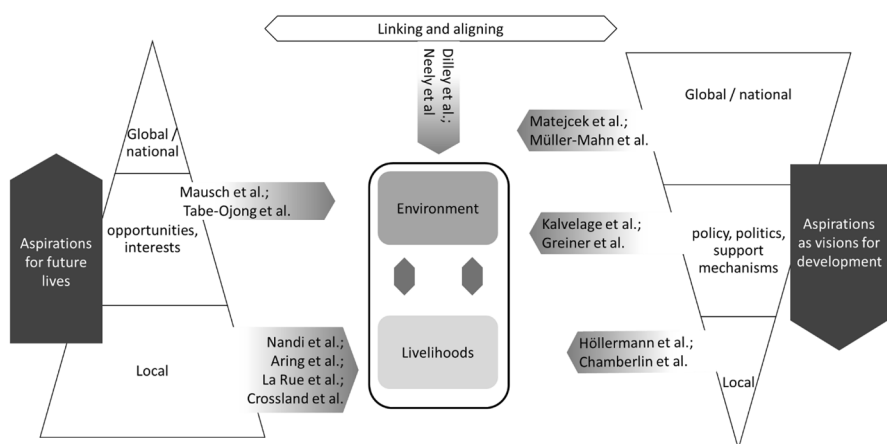


Fig. 1 Conceptual overview of this Special Issue—local aspirations for future lives and aspirations as ‘outside’ visions for development



rationale of such interventions to promote “individual investment in institutional pathways for self-improvement while protecting these same institutions from blame when these pathways do not lead to the imagined outcomes” (Frye 2019, p. 724).

People plan, think about futures, employ tactics and strategize towards reaching their aspirations (Bennike et al. 2020) and this applies to those with power and money as well as to those without. This also implies that aspirations are far from static and any understanding or assessment of the aspirational landscape will shift and change continuously. This is especially important in the context of development projects as these projects tend to influence aspirations through the economies of anticipation (Cross 2015) and evolve along the timeline of their implementation (Levien 2011).

Across the contributions of this Special Issue and their various methodological and disciplinary entry points, all levels of this interplay between local individual aspirations (Mausch et al. 2021; Tabe-Ojong et al. 2021; Nandi and Nedumaran 2021; Aring et al. 2021; La Rue et al. 2021 and Crossland et al. 2021) and political aspirations (Matejcek and Verne 2021; Müller-Mahn et al. 2021; Kalvelage et al. 2021; Greiner et al. 2021; Höllermann et al. 2021; Chamberlin et al. 2021) are investigated with a recognition of the influence of considerations at the other end of the spectrum (see Fig. 1). Local political processes and international organizations are setting future visions based on their assessments and values while a collection of individual aspirations is shaping the response to these through the multitude of visions for future lives. Linking and aligning these two views and processes could significantly improve outcomes and accelerate progress (Neely et al. 2021; Dilley et al. 2021). How this plays out towards reaching development goals such as livelihood improvement or environmental targets is outlined and reflected upon in more detail in the following section.

Perspectives and Insights

Aspirations for Future Lives

The first set of studies (the left-hand side of Fig. 1) takes an individual-level perspective across a number of East African countries. While aspirations are the focus of attention, the constraints faced by individuals both in the formation as well as the pursuit of their aspirations are highlighted and analysed. Agricultural development as one of the most commonly used entry points for rural development is facing increasing scrutiny for often not considering the realities faced by their targets (e.g. Harris and Orr 2014; Gassner et al. 2019; Mausch et al. 2018; Dorward et al. 2009). Verkaart et al. (2018) theorized how aspirations would play out against the Dorward et al. (2009) framework for farming futures and outlined how different opportunity spaces and aspirations play out as incentives to adopt, or not, different technologies. The basic characteristics such as risk profiles, labour demands and existing farming systems are likely important drivers that need to be taken into account.

For this Special Issue, aspirations are not proposed as the solution for development efforts but are suggested as one additional tool to better align support



mechanisms with the wants and needs of the people they are meant to assist. The perceived opportunity space plays a significant role across all contributions and the resulting plans, tactics and strategies towards reaching aspired futures. The interactions between development efforts and aspired futures are scrutinized and allow an in-depth assessment of underlying assumptions of development planners towards their constituency.

This sub-set of papers incorporates qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method studies that examine future goals and livelihood strategies while highlighting how these link to agriculture, youth, location and gender. Here, Tabe-Ojong et al. (2021) and Mausch et al. (2021) focus on inter-community diversity of aspirations and the influence of the opportunity space. Nandi and Nedumaran (2021), La Rue et al. (2021), Crossland et al. (2021) and Aring et al. (2021) focus more on individuals' perspectives and investigate differences within groups faced with similar biophysical opportunity spaces. These studies provide a broad overview, highlighting the breadth and complexity of the issues, the currently used methods to measure and elicit aspirations and a summary of current gaps in understanding. There is a clear focus on how a consideration of aspirations in development efforts would have implications for current and possible future development approaches and themes such as migration, shocks or extension systems.

In their systematic review, Nandi and Nedumaran (2021) outline the importance of aspirations as frameworks for choices and investments in income-generating activities, predominantly associated with farming. However, they caution that aspiration failures are more prevalent in poorer and marginalized groups which raises concerns about widening gaps. The most commonly used method among the studies reviewed was the Aspiration Index developed by Beaman et al. (2012) and Bernard and Taffesse (2012, 2014).

This index is also the method employed by Tabe-Ojong et al. (2021) who focus on the influence of ecological shocks, such as invasive species (*Prosopis* and *Parthenium*) and less permanent threats such as the Fall Armyworm, on the level of aspirations. They caution that the presence of invasive species and the threat of pest emergence reduce aspirations and could lead to a downward aspirations spiral. In line with Nandi and Nedumaran (2021) they recommend focussing on increasing the capacity to aspire in efforts to avoid aspiration-based poverty traps.

Tabé Ojong et al. and Nandi and Nedumaran (2021) concur that the index is a useful tool that is easily integrated into standard surveys. However, in the context of this Special Issue, we would consider such an index as a measure of ambition rather than of aspiration. The index quantifies how much better off someone would like to be but offers few clues as to how any future desired state is to be brought about. This allows only indirect insights into any developmental support mechanisms that might be necessary.

Mausch et al. (2021) take a different approach and explicitly focus on how aspirations shape income portfolios across farm and off-farm income streams in their analysis of aspirational differences across contrasting regions of Kenya. Using a narrative-based approach, they highlight the importance of the perceived opportunity space in the formation of aspirations. Similar to Nandi and Nedumaran (2021) they point out that immediate needs often restrict the ability to



pursue aspirations. Importantly, they found large yet often overlooked diversity within communities which could inform future options for effective development. Focussing on the role of agriculture as one of the most commonly used entry points for development support they reveal that even farming households share farming-related future visions in only 65% of cases.

Using the same sample of respondents, La Rue et al. (2021) investigate the widely held assumption that young people are not interested in farming as a livelihood. Their contribution also investigates the methodological influence in forming this assumption as they use both the aspiration index as well as a narrative-based approach. While there is a tendency towards increased farming-focussed aspiration narratives with increasing age of the respondent, the young people interviewed tend to envision at least a partial farming-based future. They aspire to remain in their rural homes and to mixed livelihoods involving both farm and off-farm activities. This reiterates the need for a range of support mechanisms that not only cater to diverse inter-personal aspirations but also to diverse portfolios of career activities.

Linking to the higher likelihood of aspirational failure of marginalized groups found by Nandi and Nedumaran (2021), Crossland et al. (2021) use narratives combined with focus group discussions to take an in-depth look at female aspirations in a region with high rates of male out-migration. Social norms limit migration by women but in the absence of men, women's agency has increased. Based on their new de facto role as farm managers, they report increased confidence and more opportunities to make their own farming decisions. Such increased agency of women needs to be taken into account when designing and implementing training opportunities and other supportive approaches.

Aring et al. (2021) also highlight the critical boundaries of aspiration formation as uncertainties and socio-economic preconditions shape, or rather restrict, the opportunities to accumulate assets and grow. They also examine why some people explore more creatively what options exist and others are more passive and just 'hang in'. The critical role of personal connections and social networks is one explanation for both positive or negative influences here. Taking a community-based perspective, the critical need to focus on an increased capacity to aspire emerges again as a potential factor for success.

Aspirations as Visions for Development

The second set of contributions (the right-hand side of Fig. 1) explores top-down political aspirations translated into large-scale development projects and their impact on livelihoods, but also how aspirations of individuals are influenced by such large-scale interventions. Nation states often adopt desirable futures from international organizations and express them in policy recommendations. For example, the World Development Report 2009 advocates the importance of agglomeration forces and suggests concentration of population and economic activities and so fostering large cities and rural-urban migration (World Bank 2009). The UN General Assembly in 2008 and the World Economic Forum in 2009 and 2010 stressed the importance of infrastructure in the form of the so-called growth corridors which are meant to



integrate places and connect them to global markets (Paul and Steinbrecher 2013; Galvez Nogales 2014). These expectations are often based on neoclassical economic theories. In short, the improved connectivity and decreasing transport costs to markets allow, for example, farmers and touristic businesses to specialize and to generate economies of scale. It is assumed that this positive impulse attracts additional related firms (e.g. agro-input suppliers and food processors or tourism-related suppliers and restaurants) located at different places along the growth corridor. These new players are expected to enhance spatial concentration processes along the corridor, providing employment and spillover effects. Another example of top-down political aspirations is the introduction of community-based conservation, heavily supported by NGOs. Trying to balance out the need to preserve biodiversity but at the same time allowing for sustainable land use by local residents, community-based conservation has been introduced in many African countries. Often, protected areas were established across communal lands with a strict zoning plan defining which landuse is allowed and affects e.g. farmers in their daily practices and thus livelihood strategies (Hulke et al 2020). In all cases, political aspirations are meant to create opportunity spaces for the locals.

The papers in this section cover a number of themes around political aspirations of desirable futures described above including urban migration (Chamberlin et al. 2021), wildlife conservation (Matejcek and Verne 2021), large-scale irrigation schemes (Höllermann et al. 2021), growth corridors and value chains (Kalvelage et al. 2021); road infrastructure (Greiner et al. 2021) and megaprojects (Müller-Mahn et al. 2021). These studies provide the readership with a fine-grained, contextually sensitive examination of the ways in which aspirations interact with broader government-led attempts to improve peoples' livelihoods using a broad range of methods.

Contrary to the expectations of the World Bank, urban centres in many African countries are not able to provide employment opportunities to the massive flow of labour from rural to urban areas. Chamberlin et al. (2021) analyse under which conditions out-migration can be mitigated and test quantitatively whether more vibrant rural economies in Zambia have an impact on the exodus of youth from rural areas. Overall, they demonstrate that more vibrant rural economies are less prone to out-migration although the sectoral composition matters. They find that the particular opportunity space can have contrasting effects. Market orientation of agriculture reduces out-migration as it increases local opportunities but a stronger rural non-farm economy increases out-migration as it makes it easier to find non-farm employment elsewhere. The importance of agriculture in shaping opportunity spaces is also shown by Crossland et al. (2021), especially for women.

This opportunity space is what is often attempted to be changed through large-scale development initiatives such as growth corridors or large irrigation schemes like SAGCOT. These irrigation schemes can also reduce negative environmental effects which Tabe-Ojong et al. (2021) highlighted as negatively affecting aspiration levels. Höllermann et al. (2021) and their investigation of how the presence and prospects of irrigation schemes affect aspirations against the background of group dynamics provides further insights into the interaction between people, the environment and support mechanisms as crafted by politicians and development agencies.



Supporting the notion that the biophysical opportunity space (here reliable water supply as a key input into farming) is a critical component of aspiration formation, they outline how external changes in this opportunity space affect local aspirations and decision making.

A similar approach to broadening the opportunity spaces of rural people is investigated by Kalvelage et al. (2021) who analyse how community-based resource management (CBRM) schemes under the recently created Kavango–Zambezi Trans-frontier Conservation Area (KAZA) impacts local livelihoods. CBRM is designed to combine nature conservation and rural development, with conservation areas serving as a resource base for wildlife tourism. In parallel, the growth corridor policy aims to integrate the region into tourism global production networks (GPNs) by means of infrastructure development. Yet, the promise of linking infrastructure development and tourism policies through conservation envision has not materialized. Tourism-driven development reaches only a very limited number of rural residents who are employed in low-wage jobs and/or receive payments from conservancy managements. On the contrary, tourism businesses outside Zambezi e.g. in the capital Windhoek or travel agents in Europe are able to appropriate value created in the resource region.

Connecting to Kalvelage et al. (2021) and their critical investigation of tourism-based development, Matejcek and Verne (2021) shed light on the potential downsides of these top-down development approaches through their focus on human–wildlife conflicts. Matejcek and Verne (2021) focus on the localized effects of the aspirations of globalized development actors for nature conservation and the societal values these bring about. These interactions and possible disconnects between local aspirations and needs are a critical component in making national and global goals have relevance for local populations and allow them to benefit from, and contribute to, these targets. In the Kilombero Valley, they focus on a recent project by the African Wildlife Foundation to restore degraded wildlife corridors. The tension between local residents' aspirations for future lives collides with restoration efforts promoted by outside actors. This finding emphasizes how closer consideration and alignment of these conflicting goals are critically important as resources are otherwise spent unproductively or even destructively. A reconsideration of the restoration-as-development approach is needed to effectively facilitate both local development and nature restoration in co-habitated spaces.

One of the common approaches for creating opportunities in remote regions is increasing the connectivity to markets through building new roads. Greiner et al. (2021) outline how rural roads affect livelihoods, values and knowledge of rural people and shape their views on infrastructure projects in more general terms. They are able to confirm some earlier findings on the positive effects of roads, not only for better-off households, but also for the poorer segments. People's openness to social change appears to be improved as they also become more educated, and their values change with the presence of roads. However, other segments of the society in the focus region of the northern drylands of Kenya avoid roads and have less positive perspectives on such infrastructure as their (agro-)pastoral lifestyle tends to be negatively affected. These heterogeneous effects need to be taken into account when planning infrastructure development initiatives.



Finally, Müller-Mahn et al. (2021) take the example of three ‘megaprojects’ in Kenya and outline how the proposed concept of the ‘politics of aspirations’ leads to success or failure of these types of projects in relation to the local benefits they set out to provide. Their literature-based contribution reviews three megaprojects in Kenya, i.e. the construction of an International Airport and an abattoir at Isiolo, the Galana-Kulalu scheme and the standard gauge railway from Mombasa to Nairobi. Especially for the case of the Isiolo projects they highlight the role of policy or politicians’ aspirations which in some cases can take the form of ‘wishful thinking’ and potentially lead to failures. However, complex projects like these are difficult to evaluate and while some promises may not have been kept others may still materialize. Their politics of aspiration concept allows analysis of the formation of political aspirations and the capacities to aspire by the various actors involved and how these two factors translate into action.

Linking and Aligning Aspirations

The third group of two studies (the top of Fig. 1) explores how the understanding of people’s aspirations for future lives can be utilized to support development efforts of NGOs, governments or other development actors to better align support mechanisms and future development visions.

Dilley et al. (2021) describe, through in-depth interviews with the extension workers that offer insights from their daily work, how people’s aspirations too often misalign with development interventions. They combine the accounts of people who farm with those of extension agents who link the visions of political and development projects to those of the target groups. After outlining drivers of aspiration formation along a framework for technology adoption (Glover et al 2019) they explore how extension services respond to these drivers and link with aspired futures. They suggest that aspirations may be an important entry point to facilitate more responsive programming of national and international development agencies.

It is at this critical connection where the approach of Neely et al. (2021) could offer valuable new avenues for implementation. They outline their participatory process ‘Stakeholder Approach to Risk Informed and Evidence-based Decision-making (SHARED)’ that aims to enable evidence-based decision making and they describe its application to the development of the Turkana development plan in northern Kenya. They show how this planning process adopted methods that take a range of citizen and stakeholder views into account. The use of this methodology could bring household aspirations to the attention of decision makers and allow them to incorporate these into their processes, thus enabling the alignment of political processes and decisions with a population’s needs and wants.



Conclusions

This special issue represents the coming together of a diverse set of studies using different methods and disciplinary entry points. The papers examine rural aspirations across a range of subject areas pertinent to rural development in Africa and beyond using different approaches, explore the breadth and depth of this research theme, and relate this to current, and possible future, development interventions.

The contributions combine a focus on (i) the aspirations and imagined futures of individuals that define and shape institutions with (ii) a focus on the formation and implementation process of development pathways around political top-down aspirations. Thereby the combination may facilitate more transformational change. This is not to argue that a mere recognition and mutual exchange of visions and ideas will solve all conflicts and trade-offs and satisfy hidden agendas, but rather that a facilitated process with prior recognition and understandings of the aspirations of all actors would certainly less often be affected by hidden agendas and power relations that hinder progress for all. It would reduce implicit or explicit sentiments of ‘blaming poverty on defective aspirations’ (White 2021) or the idea of individual ‘aspiration failure’ (Janzen et al. 2017; Mekonnen and Gerber 2017) and create accountability on both sides. On the individual level, making more pathways and future states imaginable by broadening aspirational windows could ultimately allow more people to pursue their aspirations and improve their lives within a conducive institutional and social setting. This would bring aspirations and wellbeing closer together. Aspirations are impacted by notions of happiness, quality of life, lifestyle and satisfaction as ultimate life goals and ultimately form the basis for wellbeing (Leavy and Smith 2010). The recognition of how political processes and development agendas (mis)align on the ground and could be designed to better account for - and support - constituencies’ aspirations is provided in two case studies that outline how practitioners could better incorporate aspirational considerations into planning and implementation.

Overall, the special issue emphasizes the complexity of aspirations, the state of knowledge to date across a broad range of research fields and enables the identification of general and sector/context-specific gaps in understanding where further research is required. It facilitates a comprehensive engagement with questions relating to the ways in which policy and development actors can design effective interventions that work with people’s aspirations and goals. Knowledge gaps around aspirations and their formation and pursuit are outlined in this collection. The authors contribute new insights into the potential this line of research has in progressing the rural development agenda. Jointly, higher-level governmental and inter-governmental commitments to sustainable development are addressed with a distinct recognition of the effect on rural populations and their envisioned futures.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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