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Article

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Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights

Provided in Cooperation with:

Elsevier

Suggested Citation: Mendoza, Cristóbal; Domínguez Mujica, Josefina; Parreño-Castellano, Juan Manuel (2025) : Islands on the move: Non-mass tourism and migration in El Hierro (Spain) and Pico (Portugal), Annals of Tourism Research Empirical Insights, ISSN 2666-9579, Elsevier, Amsterdam, Vol. 6, Iss. 1, pp. 1-11,
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2025.100171>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/337828>

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Islands on the move: Non-mass tourism and migration in El Hierro (Spain) and Pico (Portugal)

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ARTICLE INFO

Editor: Dr. Ksenia Kirillova

Keywords:

International migration
Tourism life cycle
Life transitions
Small islands
El Hierro (Spain)
Pico (Portugal)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines migration inflows in El Hierro (Canary Islands, Spain) and Pico (Azores, Portugal) and their relationship with tourism. It investigates how immigrants' work-life transitions are linked to tourism involvement, highlighting how migration reshapes the islands' economies. Immigrants contribute to shifting the productive model from pre-tourism structures to economies increasingly dominated by tourism. The analysis concludes that these islands do not fit neatly into traditional classifications of island tourism development. Instead, they represent a unique typology, marked by the early arrival of enterprising foreign immigrants. This shift is driven by both local conditions and global influences, such as globalization, digitalization, and EU membership, positioning these islands within a broader economic and social transformation.

1. Introduction

Small islands often share common traits as tourist destinations, facing similar issues and challenges in planning, managing, and developing tourism, being so distinctive from other destinations and remaining somehow fruitful laboratories for research (Baldacchino, 2006; Sharpley, 2012). Indeed, tourism development in these small-scale island contexts are more likely to promote strategies that respect the environment and steer clear of mass tourism (Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008). All this helps establish a unique small-scale model, distinct from traditional sun-sea-sand patterns, and positioned between the involvement and development stages in the Tourism Area Life Cycle model (Johnston, 2001).

At early stages of tourism development, labour immigration does not significantly impact small islands' economies, as local labour theoretically meets the demand for workers, according to the Small Islands Developing States model (Pratt, 2015). Yet, the size and isolation of some small islands might have an impact on shortages of both highly skilled and manual workers (Baum, 2012; Shakeela, Ruhanen, & Breakey, 2011). Furthermore, the specificities of these remote locations may also attract a certain type of lifestyle immigrants looking to relocate from other areas, possibly seeking a professional change in their careers. All this creates a unique environment attracting a variety of individuals

who may fall into different categories of immigrants, from lifestyle movers to more classical entrepreneur and worker immigrants (Danson & Burnett, 2014).

This paper aims to analyse the different types of in-movers into El Hierro (Canary Islands, Spain) and Pico (Azores, Portugal) and its connection with tourist involvement on both islands. In doing so, it examines the interconnected work and life-cycle transitions of a group of immigrants on the two islands. Here it is argued that a tourism perspective provides valuable insights into the life cycle transformations of immigrants drawn by their unique tourist-economic appeal of remote locations, where immigrants may indeed play a crucial role in understanding the development of tourism. In other words, the tourist potentialities of these specific geographical areas and factors, such as tourist and territorial strategies or the characteristics of local societies, might explain the labour transitions within the life cycles of immigrants and, in turn, these immigrant transitions may explain the tourism life cycle of both islands. The bottom line is that tourism partly triggers migration (and somehow shapes migration flows), and migration partly triggers (a specific type of) tourism development (Müller, 2021; Williams & Hall, 2000).

El Hierro in the Canary Islands and Pico in the Azores serve as important case studies in tourism literature, highlighting sustainable tourism strategies for small, remote islands with fragile ecosystems.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annale.2025.100171>

Received 12 September 2024; Received in revised form 27 February 2025; Accepted 27 February 2025

Available online 8 March 2025

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Both islands prioritize environmental sustainability and niche tourism over mass tourism, focusing on distinct attractions that appeal to specific market segments. El Hierro aims to be the first 100 % renewable energy island, leveraging eco-friendly tourism with focuses on ecotourism (e.g. hiking, diving), while Pico emphasizes conservation of its UNESCO-listed volcanic landscapes and biodiversity, with popular activities like hiking, whale watching and vineyard tours. These islands illustrate alternative tourism models that support rather than dominate local economies, allowing tourism to eventually complement other traditional sectors such as agriculture. As “peripheral” tourism destinations, they show how isolated regions can overcome logistical and marketing challenges through strategic branding with a focus on natural and cultural assets. Their approaches provide insights into sustainable, resilient tourism development that balances economic, environmental, and social priorities, offering a valuable model for other fragile and remote destinations worldwide. These islands may also be unique in drawing specific types of immigrants who are attracted not only by typical motivations like the “rural idyll” or “a new lifestyle,” but also by a desire for “differentiation” and “uniqueness” (Sampaio & King, 2019).

The article explores the challenges and benefits of immigrants’ life-cycle transitions and the circumstances that facilitate them on small islands. This includes the variety of capitals immigrants may possess and expand at their destination, as well as the socioeconomic context and island political management (Booth, Chaperon, Kennell, & Morrison, 2020). The research hypothesis underpinning the article posits that individuals’ life cycle transitions from tourism to permanent immigration, and from paid employment to entrepreneurship on small islands might highlight the intricate various relationship between migration and tourism. This close relationship between early-stage tourism and the arrival of foreign-born workers and investors may also reflect the personal and professional transitions of tourists who become immigrant workers and entrepreneurs in tourism-related activities. These personal transitions also exhibit the evolution of the tourism model itself in small island contexts, where unique forms of engagement with tourist activities are tested and developed (Polido, João, & Ramos, 2014).

2. Theoretical background: tourism, immigration and LIFE cycle in small islands

Island destinations have often been essential to the tourism imaginary, capturing our attention since Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe* written in 1719 (Hampton & Jeyacheya, 2020). Certainly, the small size and the relative isolation of these places offers an enticing and innovative tourism product demanded around the world (Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008). As any tourist destination, small islands can be analysed through the lens of the Tourism Area Life Cycle theory, which provides a framework for understanding the nature and evolution of tourism destination (Butler, 1980). This theory has been enhanced by various conceptual advancements (Agarwal, 2006; Butler, 2012; Hovinen, 2002; Moore & Whitehall, 2005) and validated by alignment with other models (Miossec, 1977), but its application to small islands has been limited, especially with regard to the decline of destinations, since “the body of work surrounding this very important issue has been sparse and lacks application to island tourism” (McLeod, Dodds, & Butler, 2021:366). When the model has been applied to islands, it has tended to do it to consolidated coastal destinations (e.g. Debbage, 1990; Ioannides, 1992; McNutt & Oreja, 1996; Polyzos, Tsiotas, & Kantlis, 2013; Ramón-Cardona & Sánchez-Fernández, 2024).

This model, based on the product theory, establishes a model of tourism development consisting of six stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation and post-stagnation. Progression through these stages is shaped by a variety of endogenous and exogenous factors and agents. In the exploration stage, tourism is sporadic and minimal. During the involvement stage, local entrepreneurs take the initiative to expand the destination’s tourism offerings, supported by increased promotion, the development of transport infrastructure, a rise

in regional or national visitors, and the steady growth of tourism activity. As visitor numbers grow significantly, early signs of saturation may appear. If control of the tourism offerings shifts from local stakeholders to external agents, the destination may enter the development stage, potentially leading to subsequent phases of the model. Finally, the post-stagnation stage may lead to either a decline or a revival of tourist activity (Butler, 1980, 2000, 2006).

Applying the Tourism Area Life Cycle model to the tourism development of the islands of El Hierro and Pico reveals that they are situated between the involvement and development phases, with an increasingly significant presence of mid-centric tourists, accompanied by an expanding range of tourist offer and increased public investment in promotion (Lagiewski, 2006). Following Johnston (2001), both islands would be placed between the pre-tourist and tourist moments. However, the permanence of both islands in this phase can be attributed to factors beyond the scope of this model. These include the tourism and territorial strategies implemented by administrations, as well as the unique characteristics of their societies.

Besides, despite both El Hierro and Pico being in the early stages of the Tourism Area Life Cycle model, they diverge from the traditional model in two key aspects: a significant influx of tourists from outside the region, and a notable presence of foreign-born workers and small investors. These two distinctive features, which do not align with the model stage in which both islands are situated, are linked to various factors: (i) their location within the so-called third European tourist periphery (Gormsen, 1981), (ii) their status as small islands, and (iii) the influence of dynamics introduced by the current digital economic system. Together, these factors shape a unique pattern of tourism and mobility, causing both islands to exhibit a distinct adaptation to the tourism phase they are in.

Focusing on foreign-born immigrants, it is worthwhile noting that on islands with significant tourist activity, a substantial portion of jobs are traditionally held by international immigrants (Aitken & Hall, 2000), with foreign-born entrepreneurship playing a crucial role in business development (Calero-Lemes & García-Almeida, 2020). Indeed, numerous studies have explored the relationship between tourism and human mobility in islands (Salvà, 2002), and models like Small Island Tourist Economy propose population mobility schemes on small islands based on tourism development (McElroy, 2003; McElroy & Hamma, 2010). Some researchers have even described islands as “peripheries of pleasure”, specialized in tourism and historically linked to migrations (Connell, 2007; Gössling & Wall, 2007). In our study cases, we suggest that international lifestyle migration may be an integral part of the early stages in the life cycle of certain island tourist areas.

When analysing lifestyle immigration in relation to tourist development, it is relevant to distinguish between different types. A first notable group includes immigrants with established employment who decide to relocate for lifestyle reasons. They have been defined as affluent, privileged, middle-class, highly educated individuals, who choose to relocate across borders not out of economic necessity, but in pursuit of a different way of life and a desire to reinvent themselves (Benson & O’Reilly, 2009). Therefore, these immigrants develop certain skills to engage in alternative ways of life, including creating a desired work-life balance and re-bonding with the natural environment, i.e. experiencing a more “exclusive” and “authentic” sense of place (Benson, 2011; Osbaldiston, 2012; Vannini & Taggart, 2014). Nevertheless, the need to generate some income, and the centrality of doing so in a place that provides highly valued natural qualities, often leads them to become small entrepreneurs.

This transition towards entrepreneurship is favoured by a tourist context itself, where individuals might explore various business opportunities (Eimermann, 2016; Iversen & Jacobsen, 2017). Therefore, it is common for these entrepreneurs to invest in small catering businesses (pubs, restaurants), specialize in real estate sales, launch hospitality businesses, or engage in activities such as recreational services and active tourism ventures (Parreño-Castellano & Domínguez-Mujica,

2016). This is also observed in retired people who might choose to embark in a small business, assuming responsibilities and tasks that were out of their interests before immigration (Domínguez-Mujica & Parreño-Castellano, 2014; Hoey, 2005). In any case, these initiatives demonstrate professional progress and economic stability among lifestyle immigrants at different life stages, with relevant implications for the consolidation of their businesses and their decision to remain in the islands.

Secondly, another type of lifestyle immigration which has not deserved much attention in the literature is those characterised by young people who moved to “exotic” destinations in search of an idea of self-achievement and personal satisfaction. This “adventurous” migration could be long-stay journeys and short migrations in pursuit of a “global experience”, while postponing their transition to adulthood. Indeed, mobility has become an important marker for youth in many different global contexts, and the term “mobile transitions” has been used to describe transition pathways under conditions of mobility (Robertson, Harris, & Baldassar, 2018). In a similar vein, the concept “liquid migration” appears to be useful for explaining some young people’s migration projects. It has been utilised to analyse intra-European migration among young people who try their luck in new and multiple destinations, benefiting from open borders and open labour markets, because they have few family responsibilities in their country of origin (Bygnes & Erdal, 2017; Engbersen & Snel, 2013). Basically, they are young graduate migrants from middle-class backgrounds who are in an intermediate position in labour markets, because of their age or because they are at an early stage in their careers, and the opt for a geographical relocation in search of an idea of self-achievement and personal satisfaction (e.g. Conradson & Latham, 2005).

In addition to these two types of lifestyle migrants, it is worth mentioning the possible presence of other types of international immigrants in these island spaces at early stages of tourism development. Indeed, the transition from employees to entrepreneurs on small islands is common not only among lifestyle immigrants but also within immigrants in general. Often, this is not merely a process of change towards entrepreneurship, but it may take time, with households maintaining strategically employed jobs and the new business as a way of reducing risks. This strategy is driven by the island context which promotes an economy of small firms, resulting in a significant interplay between employment, self-employment and entrepreneurship (Baldacchino, 2006; Rytönen, Oghazi, & Mostaghel, 2023).

Finally, another category that deserves our attention is that of overseas returnees and descendants of former emigrants. Some authors suggest that returnees are more likely to become entrepreneurs than non-immigrants. Although they may lose social capital when migrating, returnees often accumulate savings and gain valuable experience abroad, which enhances their entrepreneurial prospects back home (Wahba & Zenou, 2012).

In short, the various migration transitions that have been described might have their roots in the suitable opportunities in island areas that have not yet become established tourist destinations, contributing these transitions to the islands’ own tourism growth. We consider that El Hierro and Pico may serve as examples of this apparent contradiction. Simultaneously, both islands are regarded as unique examples of the early stages of tourism development, shaped by factors intrinsic to political strategies and local societal dynamics.

3. Research design

This article is based on a project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, and it analyses international immigration, entrepreneurship, and local development in four left-behind areas in Portugal and Spain, including El Hierro and Pico, which are the study areas of this article. In order to achieve this objective, the methodology project consists in multi-sited research that relies mainly on qualitative methods applied to carefully pre-selected case studies. This selection has been done through

a comprehensive statistical analysis of municipal data obtained from both the Spanish and Portuguese National Statistics Institute concerning the population living in the two islands.

Both territories have a similar settlement pattern: they comprise several small localities spread across three municipalities in each case: Valverde, Frontera, and El Pinar in El Hierro and Madalena, São Roque do Pico and Lajes do Pico in Pico, surrounded by extensive areas of protected natural spaces, along with low-productivity grazing and cultivation lands. El Hierro and Pico populations though display contrasting trends: while El Hierro has experienced steady population growth over the past 30 years, Pico has seen a gradual decline. However, recent data indicate a shift in all Pico’s municipalities between 2021 and 2023 (Table 1).

As for the fieldwork, a total of 20 in-depth interviews with economically active foreign-born immigrants were undertaken in El Hierro. For Pico, this number was 14. Interviewees were selected through a snowballing technique. In the first place, local contacts from the public administration and entrepreneurial associations help identify foreign-born immigrants, providing us information on possible participants in the research. Because of several ways of access, potential bias was prevented. Interviews which had an average length of one hour were carried out at the time and place of the interviewee’s choice. They were structured along three main dimensions – economic, social, and environmental. Finally, participants were assured that the collected data would be anonymized. Interviews were recoded, transcribed, and analysed through a content analysis method. First, the codes were defined and classified, according to the interview sections. Second, using free MAXQDA software, the interviews were labelled, and extracts were grouped into different topics. In addition, a systematic reading and analysis of this information enabled abstracting and selecting relevant quotations.

Although the research did not attempt to achieve a representative sample, it is distributed between immigrant entrepreneurs, self-employed workers, and employees, identified during the extensive fieldwork developed and representing different economic transitions that align with the interviewees’ life cycle. With respect to their country of birth, immigrants are more heterogeneous concerning their country of birth in El Hierro than in Pico. For the former, immigrants were distributed between those coming from other European Union countries (13) and Latin America (6), plus one person from Ukraine. For the latter, 11 out of the 14 were born in a European Union country, with one more coming from Brazil, a second from the US and the remaining third born in Angola. In both cases, we tried that informants were balanced by sex, even if women outnumbered men in the non-representative survey (12 women and eight men in El Hierro, and eight women out of 14 interviewees in Pico), and covered various age groups, even if most of them were on their 40s and 50s. Finally, they all have lived in the islands for at least one year.

Table 1
Population in El Hierro and Pico.

Municipios/ concelhos/ islands	POP 2011	POP 2021	POP 2023	Annual Growth Rate (%) 2011–21	Annual Growth Rate (%) 2021–23
Frontera	3984	4278	4465	0.71	2.14
Valverde	4992	5084	5165	0.18	0.79
El Pinar de El Hierro	1750	1936	2016	1.01	2.02
El Hierro Total*	10,726	11,298	11,646	0.52	1.52
Lajes do Pico	4711	4403	4403	-0.68	0.00
Madalena	6049	6441	6503	0.63	0.48
São Roque do Pico	3388	3292	3411	-0.29	1.78
Pico Total**	14,148	14,136	14,317	-0.01	0.64

*Official; **For 2023, estimated population

All this resulted in a broad spectrum of immigrants' labour incorporations, being the tourism the dominant sector. In El Hierro, except for two digital nomads who were working for companies in their home countries, a total of 18 interviewees were employed in various tourism-related industries on the island, including hotels and tourist accommodation (4), restaurants and the retail sector (5), and active tourism activities, such as diving, cycling, and hiking (9). A similar pattern is observed in Pico, where nine out of 14 interviewees were employed in various tourism-related activities (5 in accommodation, 2 in active tourism, 1 in retail, and 1 in a travel agency). The remaining five work in services (2 in digital services and consulting), the food-processing industry (1), academic research (1), and one retired individual who, at his interview, started producing wine. In both cases, the entrepreneurial element was predominant: 15 out of 20 were employers or self-employed workers in El Hierro, and 11 out of 14 were entrepreneurs in Pico.

The immigrants' information is complemented by material from eight semi-structured interviews with key informants, basically policymakers and employers in El Hierro, and three semi-structure interviews in Pico (the three were municipality policymakers in Pico). The analysis of the interviews enables us to explore the transitions from tourism to lifestyle migration or from labour migration to tourism business entrepreneurship in the peripheral island regions of El Hierro (Canary Islands, Spain) and Pico (Azores, Portugal). This also reveals how these transitions evolve throughout the life cycle for the majority of the interviewees' statements.

4. El Hierro and Pico: left-behind island spaces

El Hierro and Pico are two island spaces in the Atlantic, located in the Macaronesia region, which are known for their unique geomorphology and biogeography, including their volcanic origin and relict flora from the Tertiary era. These relatively small islands—El Hierro at 268.7 km² and Pico at 444.8 km²—share geographical, socio-economic, and demographic characteristics. They are somewhat distant from the capitals

of their respective archipelagos, with El Hierro located 205 km from Tenerife in the Canary Islands, and Pico 277 km from São Miguel in the Azores (Fig. 1). This places them in a peripheral position within their archipelagos, which are indeed classified as outermost regions of the European Union. This results in a double periphery, so their scale and location result in a dependence on sea and air connections for the transport of goods and people and, similarly, the transfer of innovations from core regions has been complex (Petzold & Ratter, 2015). As a matter of fact, their insular periphery impacts society, economy, and culture by increasing costs, dependency, and environmental vulnerability. However, it also helps preserve identity, landscapes, and intangible heritage. From a geopolitical and demographic perspective, their status as Spanish and Portuguese territories link them to the historical development of these countries. However, they maintain a strong singularity as crossroads and contact points between Europe, Africa, and America, with their Atlantic location being another significant feature.

As shown in Table 1, El Hierro has a modest population of 11,646 in 2023 (yet key informants estimate that the number of permanent residents is closer to 8000–9000). Pico's population is slightly higher at 14,317 in 2023, resulting in a lower population density. Both islands have historically experienced minimal or negative population growth, driven by significant emigration to mainland Europe, the Americas and, to a lesser extent Africa. This is because the islands' limited natural resources and reliance on primary-sector activities. Recently, population recovery has been observed, particularly in El Hierro. Since 2011, all its municipalities have experienced positive annual growth, with Frontera achieving an impressive 2.1 % annual growth between 2021 and 2023 (Table 1). In Pico, only Madalena displayed positive growth from 2011 to 2021, though estimates suggest this trend is common for all Pico in 2021–2023 (Table 1).

Immigration plays a crucial role in population recovery. For 2023, official data show that foreign-born residents account for 27 % of El Hierro's population, compared to only 5 % in Pico (Table 2). Foreigners on both islands are nearly evenly split between Europeans and Latin Americans, with Venezuelans and Cubans being prevalent in El Hierro

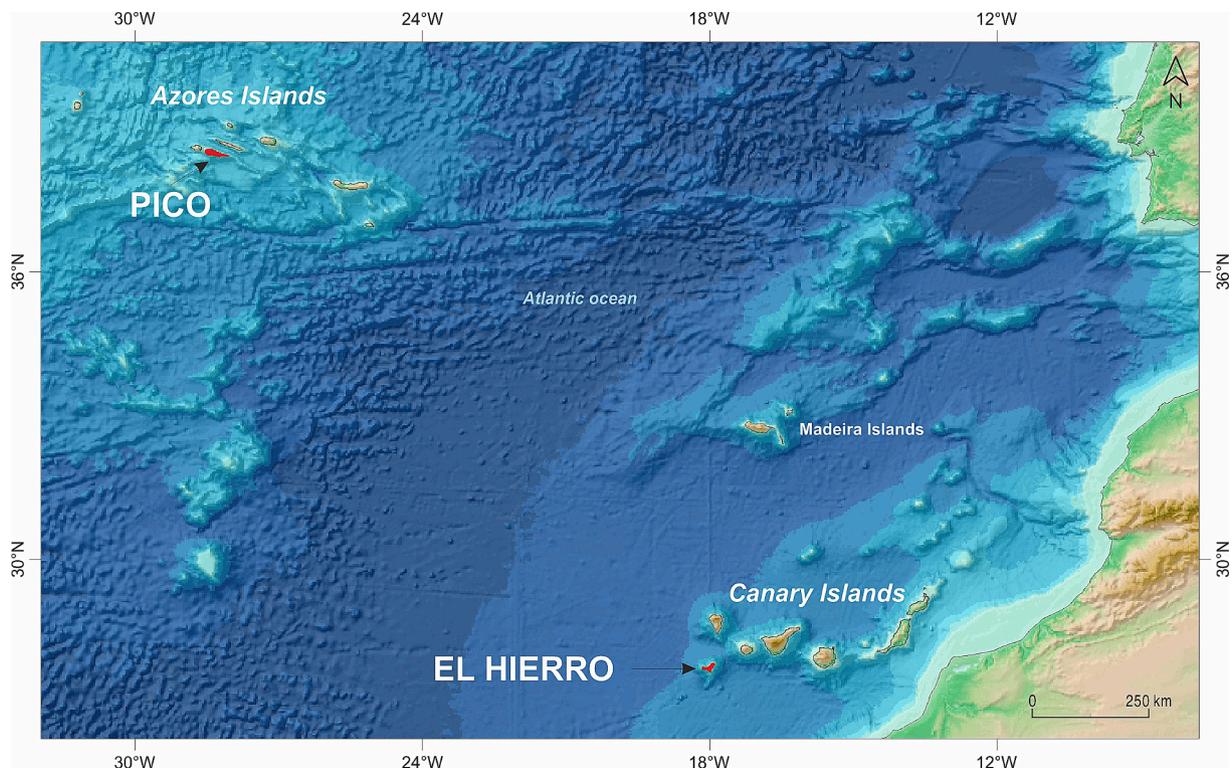


Fig. 1. Location of El Hierro (Canary Islands, Spain) and Pico (Azores, Portugal). (Source: Claudio Moreno)

Table 2
Foreign-born population and foreigners in El Hierro and Pico, by origin.

Municipios/ concelhos/islands	Foreign born 2023	Foreigners 2021	Europe	Africa	America	Asia Oceania
Frontera	1397 (32.7 %)	824	375	28	417	4
Valverde	1061 (20.9 %)	526	256	17	245	8
El Pinar de El Hierro	596 (30.8 %)	308	167	10	130	1
El Hierro Total	3054 (27.0 %)	1658	798	55	792	13
Lajes do Pico	209 (4.4 %)	108	44	6	53	5
Madalena	332 (5.5 %)	155	52	20	69	14
São Roque do Pico	183 (5.4 %)	91	37	12	30	12
Pico Total	724 (5.1 %)	354	133	38	152	31

Sources: Instituto Nacional de Estadística. INE (2024a); Instituto Nacional de Estadística. INE (2024b).

and Brazilians in Pico. The islands exhibit distinct immigration patterns, including labour migrants seeking opportunities in retailing and hospitality, lifestyle migrants drawn to the islands' natural beauty (some for retirement or entrepreneurial ventures), and return migration of former emigrants and their descendants, particularly from the Americas (Jerez Darias & Domínguez Mujica, 2024). Though beyond this paper's scope, El Hierro has become a key entry point for West African undocumented migration, straining local/regional resources and challenging humanitarian response.

In both islands, tourism activity has gradually increased since the end of the twentieth century. Initially modest, it has become more prominent in recent years, evolving differently from the mass tourism that characterizes other larger islands in both archipelagos. El Hierro avoided the Fordist sun-sand-sea tourism model that shaped much of the Canary Islands in the 1960s due to its small size, lack of sandy beaches, and limited economic capacity, driven by a largely agricultural population. The absence of an airport until 1972 and limited flight connections thereafter further hindered tourism development, with early investment in tourism infrastructure being scarce. From the late 20th century, nature-based tourism began to grow, spurred by private initiatives and foreign lifestyle migrants acquiring properties. The Canary Islands' autonomy in 1982 and European Union funding since 1986 improved infrastructure and public services, while conservation measures like the Biosphere Reserve designation (2000) and UNESCO Geopark status (2014) boosted eco-tourism appeal. Similarly, Pico's economy in the mid-20th century relied on agriculture, with emigration to North America being common. By the 1990s, lifestyle migrants were drawn to its rural charm. Portugal's European Union membership in 1986 improved infrastructure, and conservation initiatives, such as the Pico stratovolcano's designation under Natura 2000, enhanced its international reputation, attracting investment and tourism-related entrepreneurship (Sampaio & King, 2019). Overall, regional tourism policy has encouraged low-impact, sustainable tourism, avoiding large accommodations and relying on local resources on the two islands. This has helped retain the population and boost income but has also driven up prices and restricted housing access.

Nowadays, for El Hierro, official data indicate that approximately 70 % of arrivals originate from other Canary Islands, while 15–20 % travel from mainland Spain in 2023 (ISTAC, 2024). The remaining 10–15 % are mainly visitors from Central and Western Europe, notably, Germany, Great Britain, and France. Seasonal patterns vary depending on the tourist origins: Domestic travellers tend to visit El Hierro during summer months, public holidays, and weekends, while international visitors prefer the period spanning from autumn to spring (ISTAC, 2024). In 2023, official data on visitors staying in accommodation facilities in Pico indicate that 64 % of guests were from outside Portugal. The largest groups of foreign visitors come from Germany (25 %), followed by France and the United States. Unlike El Hierro, both domestic and international tourists peak during the summer months, from June to

September, when 63 % of all overnight stays in accommodation establishments occur (Serviço Regional de Estatística. Açores, 2024).

In short, in El Hierro and Pico, investment in tourism has primarily come from small businesses, fostering a type of tourism known as nature tourism or active tourism (Mendoza, Domínguez-Mujica, Parreño-Castellano, & Moreno-Medina, 2024 for El Hierro; Rebelo, Ezequiel, Mendes, & Carvalho, 2017 for Pico). As seen in our fieldwork, and developed in this article, many of these businesses are supported by small foreign investors, especially from European countries. As a result, the recent tourism specialization is closely tied to immigration, exemplified by some tourists becoming tourism promoters. The unique volcanic landscapes have significantly contributed to this trend, with El Hierro being designated as Biosphere Reserve in 2010 and Geopark in 2014 and Pico *currais* (volcanic stone enclosures for wine production), being listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004 (Fig. 2). In this regard, Pico's experiential approach to wine and wine tours generally offers visitors interactions with winemakers, volcanic terroir exploration, and wine tasting in this vineyard landscape. Driven by an environmental focus, and supported by protection regulations in both territories, the emphasis on nature tourism helps explain the tourist specialization of these Atlantic islands. To meet this tourism demand, as shown in Table 3, small tourism establishments predominate, with few hotels and a total accommodation capacity of around 2800 places. Tourism investment mainly comes from small entrepreneurs, both local and international. These characteristics position both areas in the early stages of the life cycle model for tourist destinations, as previously mentioned.

5. Lifestyle immigrants: transitions from tourism to entrepreneurship

The project clearly identifies a group of lifestyle immigrants among those interviewed in both El Hierro and Pico. These individuals chose these islands for personal reasons, drawn by their beauty and tranquility, as a way to escape the stressful lives back home. This aligns with extensive observations in the lifestyle immigration literature (see, for instance, Benson, 2011; Vannini & Taggart, 2014). However, the literature has not fully documented that "becoming" a lifestyle immigrant is usually a long-term, often delayed decision. Indeed, the determination to start a new life is not easy and typically takes several years. An exploration of the life transitions of immigrants in El Hierro and Pico shows that, usually, the first phase involves contact with the islands through initial tourist visits, which tend to occur periodically. After several years, tourism shifts to residential mobility. This transition often coincides with a significant life-cycle change (see also Amit, 2007) and is normally accompanied by purchasing property on the islands and constructing or renovating a house. This process is illustrated by a Swedish couple who bought a house in 2017.



Fig. 2. Natural landscapes in El Hierro (above) and Pico (below). (Source: Claudio Moreno)

Table 3
Tourism data. El Hierro and Pico.

Islands	Active establishments and accommodation places*		
	Hotels	Local accommodation**	Accommodation places
El Hierro	11	545	2846
Pico	9	432	2820

*El Hierro: February 2024. Pico: 2023 year average.

**Local accommodation in El Hierro includes apartments (21) and holiday homes (524)

Sources: Turismo de Islas Canarias. Portal de Investigación (2024); Serviço Regional de Estatística. Açores (2024).

I'm a headmaster in Sweden, and my husband is a project manager. We both negotiate homeworking (...) We bought a house in 2017 in the end of the world. It's a very slow pace in the island (...) Our idea was not selling everything in Sweden and settle here. We have our jobs and our children (...) Before COVID, it was just a holiday house. The COVID was a turning point. We now spend about four months per year, but the idea, when our children grow up and we retire, is stay longer periods, and eventually move in (Swedish professionals, 59/56, El Hierro).

Even if this is not the case of the previous couple, those who finally take the decision of moving permanently into El Hierro or Pico generally need to find an economic activity to generate income locally. These interviewees were typically middle-class, middle-aged professionals entering the tourism sector. In this regard, it has been observed that immigrant entrepreneurship in rural areas is notably prevalent in the tourism sector, because it is somehow perceived as an industry with low

entry barriers (Lundmark, Ednaron, & Karlsson, 2014) and also because tourism supports what Carson and Carson (2018) refer to as “lifestyle entrepreneurship”. In our case, however, their transition into entrepreneurship involves entering the tourism industry, an unfamiliar economic sector in which they have no prior experience. Yet, businesses are more than mere economic activities; they reflect its own way of understanding a more “natural” contact with the rural environment (see also Olmedo, van Twuijver, & O’Shaughnessy, 2023). This is often done with little knowledge of the host country procedures (and occasionally poor local language skills). This process is illustrated by a German couple who worked as project managers in the Internet industry back home. They bought a property, designed their own business plan, built rental houses, and launched an accommodation business in an isolated area of Pico. In their own words:

About twenty years ago, we visited Pico for a holiday and found it beautiful. Two years later, we returned and thought about living here, wondering how we could make a living. We kept coming back on holidays. It took us seven years to make the final decision and save enough money for it (...) Our lives in Germany were quite stressful, with occasionally two-hour commutes to work every day (...) Finally, we bought a property, and decided to build five small, detached houses in it, planning to live in one and rent out the others (...) This process was quite stressful. If we had known all the administrative and worker-related hassles, we wouldn't have done it. At the time, we barely spoke Portuguese (...) There were few tourists and very poor infrastructure then, and our property is off the beaten track (German accommodation providers, 48/52, Pico).

Significant decisions concerning immigration and entrepreneurship

are made as a couple. Typically, former tourists who choose to start a business after moving to the islands are married, middle-class couples in their forties and fifties, without family responsibilities. They migrate without children, and if they have children, they are already grown and living independently. The process of making a radical life change is closely tied to the decision to leave behind an unsatisfactory past and embark on a new beginning in a completely different environment. This whole process occasionally involves selling their property back home to start a new life and business. This is the case for the Italian couple interviewed in El Hierro, who acknowledged that the entire resettlement process would have been more complicated if they had had children.

My wife and I initially visited the island for a three-day diving experience in the marine reserve in 2006, and instantly fell in love with its charm. Over the course of three years, we found ourselves returning repeatedly, eventually deciding to sell our house in Italy and purchase a property in El Hierro (...) Initially uncertain about our plans, my background as a tourist guide and a connection with a tour operator led us to establish a hiking business here (...) Over time, our enterprise evolved into a travel agency, enabling us to offer comprehensive tourist packages (Italian tourism employers, 64/61, El Hierro).

This Italian couple demonstrates how they have consolidated their presence in the active tourism niche over time, adapting to tourism demand. A highly specialized tourism labour market can create numerous business opportunities, which in turn may generate demand for workers that the local population struggles to supply. For instance, Johann and Heidi, a German couple running an active tourism business, mentioned in interview that they needed an additional worker for hiking and cycling activities. However, local workers were not proficient in German, and “they could not assume risks caused by language misunderstandings” in outdoor activities. Consequently, foreign-capital businesses might attract immigrants to the islands.

This is exemplified by Sandro, a young Italian who was drawn to the beauty of Pico and decided to stay and work on the island in a whale-watching business operated by foreign-born entrepreneurs. His reasons for arriving and staying in Pico are similar to those of lifestyle entrepreneurs, aiming to achieve a balance between work and personal life. However, this profile differs from the typical lifestyle immigrant described earlier. Sandro is an example of young individuals immigrating into Pico and El Hierro in a more adventurous and less structured manner, with no family obligations, and gradually gaining experience in active tourism. On the other hand, this appears to be a general trend among young Europeans who explore new destinations, benefiting from open borders and labour markets, as they have few or no family responsibilities in their home countries (see, for instance, Engbersen & Snel, 2013; Bygnes & Erdal, 2017). In Sandro’s words:

I came here on holiday, alone, without friends, 13 years ago. I was interested in whale watching. When I saw this place, I immediately fell in love with the place and the people (...) I wanted to stay, so I asked a whale-watching company what I could do. I had no previous experience in diving, no boat license, no English, no Portuguese, nothing. I lived on my savings and worked for almost nothing, just to gain experience (...) Slowly, over time, in a very self-taught manner, I moved into professional photography and documentary work specializing in marine resources. With the support of the *concelho*, I created my own business and can use this co-working space (Italian digital services entrepreneur, 49, Pico).

Two personal and professional transitions emerge from previous evidence. The first transition relates to the shift from tourist to lifestyle entrepreneur. This process typically takes several years, as it involves significant changes in professional trajectories. Interviewees gradually leave their jobs back home to pursue entrepreneurship in a foreign country, on a small island, and in previously unfamiliar tourism

businesses. This transition usually involves selling properties in their home countries and buying houses that can be adapted for business in Portugal or Spain. The second transition fits a different type of lifestyle immigrant—typically younger and without family obligations—aligning with the “migrants on the middle” profile described in the literature. However, in our fieldwork, the migration is not seen as a temporary move for personal and professional experience but as a permanent migration connected with a shift in personal life objectives.

The interviews also suggest that lifestyle immigrants emerge as important drivers of new tourism products and markets, and introduced a range of new ideas, skills and external networks to the islands (see also Carson & Carson, 2018). Their initiatives are viewed positively by local authorities, as they are seen as beneficial to island development. As noted by a key informant in El Hierro, “we are accustomed to Europeans living here—some after retirement, others during extended stays while still working. Even if they are not fluent in Spanish, they appreciate local traditions and frequently participate in them”. Rather than competing with local workers, lifestyle immigrants provide complementary contributions to local labour markets by stimulating the economy. These contributions include promoting agricultural and livestock products, creating jobs in the service sector, and generating public revenue. Furthermore, in both El Hierro and Pico, the establishment of eco-friendly accommodations and active tourism aligns with islands’ broader desire for sustainable tourism. In this way, immigrants influence tourism dynamics by shaping the type of visitors the islands might attract; a traveller who prioritizes low-impact slow tourism and environmental-friendly experiences (Sampaio & King, 2019).

6. Small island as facilitators of economic immigrant entrepreneurship

The previous section focused on lifestyle immigrants, many of whom pursue entrepreneurship as a means of making a living in Pico and El Hierro, thereby achieving a less stressful life. However, our fieldwork also indicates that both islands attract a more traditional profile of immigrants who are needed for specific niches in local labour markets. Here, we found economic immigrants primarily working in restaurants and retail. Social networks play a crucial role in their arrival on the island. This is exemplified by Saúl, who moved to El Hierro at age 40 in 2003, leaving his wife and children in Venezuela. His connection was through his niece’s husband, whose father was born in El Hierro. Saúl’s relatives, already residing on the island, provided him with initial support.

I came here to try my luck because the situation in Venezuela was not good (...) My niece was already living here, so I started working in construction for her husband’s business (...) After three years, I applied for family reunification, and first my wife and youngest son came, followed by my two older children (...) When the 2018 economic crisis hit, I lost my job. We noticed that this restaurant was available for lease because the owner wanted to retire, so my wife and I seized the opportunity for our family (...) The previous owner had also emigrated and returned from Venezuela, and she helped us a lot (Venezuelan restaurant owner, 64, El Hierro).

This migration story fits seamlessly into a classic economic migration pattern, where (extended) family networks play a key role in understanding immigration and labour integration into El Hierro. Networks based on common roots from the country of origin are also crucial for understanding the restaurant business that Saúl establishes and its initial success. Additionally, the business is clearly a family operation that does not rely on external employees. This explains the transition from being an employee in the construction sector to becoming an entrepreneur.

However, a closer look at the narrative reveals that this business opportunity arose because someone decided to retire. This pattern is also seen in the case of an interviewed Ukrainian immigrant who followed a similar path by taking over a business that was about to close due to the

owner's retirement. In other words, immigrants help ensure the survival of businesses, addressing one of the main challenges faced by many rural European areas, where local shops and restaurants struggle to survive as older residents retire (and young people choose to emigrate elsewhere; see, for instance, [Mendoza, 2023](#)).

Previous examples come from El Hierro, where social networks that facilitate return migration seem to be stronger than in Pico. The main difference lies in the countries of destination for island former emigration. As seen before, both islands were typically poor territories that experienced strong emigration during the 20th century. However, while Azoreans headed for the U.S. and Canada, partly linked to the whaling industry, Canary Islands residents chose Latin American countries, particularly Venezuela and Cuba, which have faced economic and political crises over the past 40 years ([Couchinho, 2021](#); [Espínola, 2022](#)). This means emigrants and their relatives are more likely to "return" to the Canary Islands than to the Azores. In the latter case, migration typically occurs at the retirement stage. Moreover, connections with the destination country must remain, among "returnees", as residency should be maintained in the U.S. to receive monthly pension payments.

The fieldwork also highlights another type of economic immigration: experienced entrepreneurs who recognize the business prospects in the islands. They primarily choose these territories for their untapped potential in developing tourism-related activities. The following extracts are from two entrepreneurs who had established multiple businesses in different sectors in the past, and they decided to create a top-notch hotel in El Hierro and a whale-watching and diving agency in Pico respectively. While both are quite happy with their decisions, the first entrepreneur is more critical of El Hierro atmosphere, emphasizing how challenging it is to succeed in a small island. The second entrepreneur is more positive, likely due to having family roots in Pico.

I've been an entrepreneur my entire life (...) Following a family business, I began with jewellery in Valencia (her wife is originally from this city), and then opened a coffee shop in Tenerife (...) When I saw the opportunity to purchase this boutique hotel in such a fantastic location, I took it (...) As a foreigner, there's limited support here. Everyone is interconnected through family ties, helping each other out (...) In the hotel, I made a strong effort to establish a restaurant based on the 'kilometre zero' philosophy, but it was challenging due to underdeveloped distribution networks and delays in receiving fresh products. (Italian hotel owner, 51, El Hierro).

I was born in Angola to a Portuguese father and an Italian mother (...) When the independence war broke out, my family moved to Portugal (...) I took a course in managing tourism enterprises (...) My mother had a terrible accident and decided to semi-retire in Pico, where she had already bought a house (...) I saw the opportunity to buy an existing outdoor tourism business there. I transformed it into a whale-watching company that also offers diving experiences. It works reasonably well. The only problem is work is highly concentrated on summer, and this implies hiring extra workers in the season (Angolan-born tourism entrepreneur, 48, Pico).

Both entrepreneurs emphasize the potential for innovative businesses in relatively underexplored tourist niches. The last interviewee also highlighted the high seasonality of tourism in Pico, which affects the demand for new workers. This increased demand is partially met by temporary workers, many of whom initially arrive as tourists and gradually extend their stay on the island. Several interviewees noted that informal hiring practices are common in these arrangements. While the labour market in El Hierro appears to be more regulated, some interviewees also mentioned irregularities, such as unprofessional services provided by unauthorized hiking guides.

To provide a comprehensive view of entrepreneurship and a more global understanding of the island's capacity connected to mobilities, consider the following extract from Therese, a U.S. national who, along with her partner, established a business in Pico producing a specific

processed meat product originally from the U.S. This business is successful because it caters to retired Portuguese *retornados* on the island who had previously emigrated to the States. As mentioned earlier, those on U.S. pensions must travel back and forth to America to maintain these funds. This example illustrates the complex connections between long-term mobility (or extended holidays), emigrants' food nostalgia market, and new economic ventures managed by international immigrants.

My husband came here to work with a friend who was in the fisheries business. I stayed separately in California for two years. I frequently visited here as a tourist and thought it would be a fantastic place to raise my children (...) So, I moved here with my one-year-old child. The second child was born here (...) Initially, we worked in a food-processing company that specialized in a type of seafood very popular in China. My husband handled the fishing operations, while I managed all the administrative tasks. (...) After COVID, we stayed in the food processing sector but switched to producing a type of dried meat very popular in the US. To our surprise, this became a success, especially among locals with American roots. By restricting our distribution to Portugal, we faced fewer bureaucratic challenges (US food processing entrepreneur, 53, Pico).

Previous evidence reveals several key messages. First, the dynamic tourism sector in both islands offers ample opportunities for both employees and entrepreneurs. This sector includes the traditional segments of accommodation and restaurants, as well as diverse active tourism activities in highly protected environments. Second, low-skilled immigrants are needed in this dynamic sector. Many of these immigrants are connected to previous outflows from the island, with social networks facilitating the whole process in a classic economic migration pattern. Third, the tourism sector enables some economic immigrants to transition into entrepreneurship, especially as locals leave businesses on the islands. Fourth, the unique characteristics of the island labour market allow for the creation of specialized ventures that require the expertise of long-term entrepreneurs who foresee abundant business opportunities.

7. Conclusions

As highlighted in the literature, tourism and migration are interconnected and mutually dependent. Tourism partly triggers migration (workers, investors, lifestyle migrants), and migration partly triggers tourism ("ethnic" tourism, short stays for visiting friends and relatives; [Feng & Page, 2000](#); [Williams & Hall, 2000](#); [Müller, 2021](#)). This interaction is particularly relevant in the case of islands ([Alberts, 2020](#)). The article explores the relationship between tourism development and migration on two islands, where tourism is in the involvement phase of the Tourism Area Life Cycle model. In doing so, the paper has examined two types of mobile transitions of lifestyle immigrants who remain active in the labour market. In both cases, the motivation for change stems from the desire for a more sustainable, less stressful life with greater connection to nature. The first type involves adults, typically at a mature age, who leave behind family responsibilities (if any), careers, educational backgrounds, and home ownership to settle as tourism entrepreneurs, often after an initial phase of visiting as tourists. In this instance, the transition aligns with a significant life cycle shift. The second type includes younger individuals who often abandon their prior education and careers to emigrate and work for others.

Lifestyle immigrants significantly influence both the social and economic landscapes of islands. They foster the development of specific tourist niches, such as active tourism and wellness, which diversifies and sustains island economies. Their presence eventually encourages the preservation of local traditions and sustainable activities, making islands more attractive to like-minded travellers. Yet, managing these changes might require a delicate balance to ensure that local communities can benefit without losing their identity or facing undesirable economic pressures. As a matter of fact, in El Hierro, housing availability

has become a challenge for permanent and long-term residents. This issue stems from local property owners prioritizing tourist accommodations, which limits the options for residents seeking stable housing on the island.

Our fieldwork also indicates that both islands attract a more traditional profile of economic immigrants, falling into two categories: return migrants -including here non-Spanish-born relatives of former emigrants-, and entrepreneurs. The first group aligns with a classic economic migration pattern, where family networks play a key role. These immigrants often start as employees in the tourism sector and eventually transition into tourism entrepreneurship, typically in retail or catering. The second group consists of experienced entrepreneurs who, after visiting the islands as tourists, migrate to capitalize on opportunities for innovative businesses. These transitions are primarily driven by employment opportunities and do not necessarily involve changes to family structure or a break from the migrants' cultural and educational background. In our case study, these immigrants play a crucial role in sustaining small retail and accommodation businesses as their previous owners retire, with the next generation pursuing different careers.

In short, we found that, although the two analysed destinations are at an early stage of tourism, this does not hinder the arrival and life transitions for both international lifestyle and economic immigrants. According to the Tourism Area Life Cycle model, international immigration typically plays a significant role in tourism activity only after the industry has achieved certain level of development, primarily supported by substantial capital investments (Salvà, 2002). However, our findings suggest that in small-island destinations, this relationship can emerge at an earlier stage. The point to stress is that international immigration is an inherent element of the early stages of the tourism life cycle for these two islands, and a prerequisite for tourism development. In other words, the barriers theoretically associated with the initial phase of tourism are overcome by immigrants who are able to build significant economic and social capital, which they then use to establish businesses on the islands (see, for example, Mendoza et al., 2024). Our findings also reveal that neither island fully conforms to established classifications of island spaces based on tourism development (Baldacchino & Milne, 2000; Bertram & Watters, 1985; McElroy, 2006), nor do they exhibit all the characteristics expected of areas in the involvement phase of the Tourism Area Life Cycle theory. This divergence is attributed to both local and broader contextual factors affecting the tourism market, such as island size, environmental protection measures, and isolation, and migration processes, including the islands' appeal to immigrant entrepreneurs and the presence of return migrants. Indeed, the literature has long seen that changes in tourist destinations are shaped by geographical, economic, political, and social variables, as well as the ideologies and objectives of key stakeholders (Oreja Rodríguez, Parra López, & Yanes Estévez, 2008; Russell, 2006).

Migration's role in initial tourism development reflects region-specific elements that create favorable conditions for low-impact tourism, often spearheaded by foreign actors. Factors contributing to this dynamic include limited competition from an aging, poorly trained local workforce largely oriented towards public-sector employment; abundant environmental resources suitable for sustainable tourism products; and challenges posed by remoteness and insularity, which discourage large-scale investments. These conditions enable immigrants to occupy niche tourism sectors, such as active tourism and small-scale accommodations, aligning with research highlighting the tourism sector's capacity to offer opportunities for foreign workers (Carson & Carson, 2018; Lundmark et al., 2014). On an international scale, the islands' position within Europe's third tourism periphery, their proximity to key markets, membership in the European Economic Area (which provides a secure environment for small investors), and the rise of the digital economy further shape this unique migration-tourism relationship.

The study offers two main contributions. First, it refines the Tourism Area Life Cycle model's involvement phase by highlighting the

importance of migration and mobile life transitions in understanding tourism development levels. This perspective emphasizes the need to consider social, geographical, and political factors alongside the internal dynamics of the destination as a product. Second, it underscores the interdependent and symbiotic relationship between tourism and migration, reflecting the intertwined life cycles of places and people (Sheller & Urry, 2004). These findings prompt a critical question: will tourism development on these islands follow the prescriptive path outlined by the Tourism Area Life Cycle model or evolve differently? The answer will likely hinge on institutional and social engagement in shaping their development trajectories. While the study does not challenge the general prescriptive nature of the model, it advocates for a holistic interpretation considering structural and contextual factors at various geographical scales.

Authors bio

The three authors are members of the Research Group on Atlantic Societies and Spaces at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Their work focuses on tourism and migration, with a particular emphasis on human geography. They are currently involved in an EU-funded project examining immigration in left-behind regions across six European countries, as well as a Spanish-funded project exploring immigration and local development in rural areas of Spain and Portugal.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Cristóbal Mendoza: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Josefina Domínguez-Mujica:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Juan Manuel Parreño-Castellano:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on the ELDEMOR (Endogenous Local Development and Mobilities in Rural Areas of Spanish and Portuguese Peripheral Regions) project that has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (CNS2022-135614). The article has also received funding from the RE-PLACE project (European Union Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. Agreement no. 101094087).

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