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# Rural-Urban Migration of Young People in High Andean Communities in Peru: Imaginaries and Practices of Vulnerability and Social Advancement

Edgar Quispe-Mamani[1*], Leonardo López-Patana[2], Beatriz Vilma Mamani-Maron[3], Fermin Francisco Chaiña-Chura[4], Zaida Janet Mendoza-Choque[5], Vilma Luz Aparicio-Salas[6]

[1] *National University of the Altiplano Puno, Professional School of Sociology, Puno, Peru; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4877-8551; E-mail: edgarquispe@unap.edu.pe*
[2] *Independent Researcher and Consultant, Puno, Perú; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9497-5684; E-mail: leonardolopezpatana12@gmail.com*
[3] *National University of the Altiplano Puno, Professional School of Social Work, Puno, Peru; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5734-4574; E-mail: beatrizmamani@unap.edu.pe*
[4] *National University of the Altiplano Puno, Professional School of Sociology, Puno, Peru; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0559-9748; E-mail: fchaina@unap.edu.pe*
[5] *National University of the Altiplano Puno, Professional School of Social Work, Puno, Peru; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5457-8575; E-mail: zjmendoza@unap.edu.pe*
[6] *National University of San Antonio Abad of Cusco, Professional School of Anthropology, Cusco, Peru; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8993-0874*

*__Corresponding Author:__ edgarquispe@unap.edu.pe

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## ABSTRACT

The rural-urban migration of young people from the high Andean is a complex social phenomenon linked to profound territorial and structural inequalities, limited local opportunities, and sociocultural transformations that are reshaping young people's life plans. This study approaches this process from the perspective of social imaginaries, emphasizing migratory experiences based on the emotional, rational, symbolic, and practical dimensions that guide young people's migration decisions. A qualitative interpretive approach was adopted, supported by semi-structured interviews with 20 young migrants and complemented by focus groups, which allowed for the reconstruction of youth narratives and local dynamics associated with migration. The findings show that the migratory experience is marked by ambivalent feelings, expectations of social mobility, and tensions between territorial roots and the search for autonomy, as well as by the decisive influence of family, educational, and community networks. Likewise, a limited structural response capacity on the part of local actors has been identified, which contributes to the naturalization of migration as the only viable alternative. Therefore, the results suggest that youth migration cannot be understood solely as an individual decision, but rather as an expression of structural socioeconomic and political conditions, which requires comprehensive approaches to territorial development that incorporate young people as strategic actors in rural and local socioeconomic development, within the global context.

**Keywords:** Youth migration, Social imaginaries, High Andean communities, Territorial inequality, Vulnerability, Social advancement.

## INTRODUCTION

Internal migration, particularly the rural-urban flow of young people in the high Andean communities of Puno, Peru, is a multidimensional phenomenon that combines structural factors, such as rural poverty, unequal access to education and employment, and changes in land use, with symbolic dimensions deeply rooted in the social imaginaries of young people. In Puno, census data and national studies show consistent patterns of net outflow from rural districts to urban centers such as the city of Puno and other areas of greater economic dynamism, such as the city of Juliaca (INEI & CELADE-CEPAL, 2022). This process not only reconfigures the region's population map, but also highlights the acute dynamics between rural peripheries and urban centers at the regional and national levels. The migration of people from rural communities in the high Andes to cities is largely driven by young people and adolescents. This group is driven by the search for opportunities that their places of origin do not offer them, mainly in terms of higher education, formal employment, and access to quality services (Cotrado et al., 2019). Thus, the departure of this population generates negative social effects in rural areas, such as the loss of the labor force and progressive depopulation.

Beyond the structural factors of "expulsion" and "attraction", it is crucial to analyze migration from the perspective of young people, understanding their social imaginaries and the practices that shape their migratory experience. Young people's social imaginaries of the city are constructed as a space of progress, individual freedom, and opportunities for social advancement, contrasting with the feeling of stagnation and limited opportunities in their communities of origin. Young people's migration projects are often based on educational success and socioeconomic integration, motivations that are in turn reinforced by family expectations (Cotrado et al., 2019).

In terms of social practices, youth migration is part of a rural-urban continuum ( National Youth Secretariat [SENAJU], 2025). Young migrants do not completely break with their origins, but rather develop mobility strategies that allow them to accumulate assets, resources, and skills, moving between both spaces. However, in urban areas, this population is at risk of social, educational, and labor exclusion (Cotrado et al., 2019). Despite this, in their daily practices, Andean youth demonstrate agency and the ability to adapt to their new environment, maintaining and reconfiguring elements of their Andean cultural identity, in many cases, in a complex dynamic of adaptation and affirmation in the face of Western and urban culture, evident even in spaces such as the university. Furthermore, the social practices that accompany youth migration, such as their participation in family and neighborhood networks, use of informal accommodation and work networks, reassignment of roles in the home, and remittance strategies, show that migration is not an isolated act but a social and relational process that transforms both places of origin and destination (Cotrado et al., 2019; Incacutipa et al., 2022).

In high Andean communities, climate change and the precariousness of basic services shape the social imaginaries of youth migration, such as exposure to environmental risks and declining agricultural incomes, which generate youth vulnerability and consolidate urban imaginaries as alternatives to productive uncertainty in the countryside (Incacutipa et al., 2022). In this context, the purpose of this article is to analyze and interpret the perceptions and practices of vulnerability and social advancement among young migrants from the high Andean communities of Puno, Peru.

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

### Social Imaginaries and Migration

Contemporary studies on social imaginaries have shown that societies are not only organized according to material structures or formal institutions, but also based on a system of socially instituted meanings that shape perceptions, desires, practices, and forms of collective action. From Castoriadis's (1993, 2007) foundational perspective, social imaginaries constitute the source of social reality, a magma of meanings that guides and gives meaning to human practices beyond any purely rational or empirical reference. For the aforementioned author, every society produces institutions, symbols, and norms that establish a horizon of shared meaning, which allows its members to define themselves as part of a symbolic "we." From this perspective, social imaginaries are not a static set, but a permanent creation that distinguishes between instituted imaginaries: effective, crystallized in customs and traditions; and instituting imaginaries: radical, creative, capable of transforming reality and generating new forms of social meaning.

The notion of social imaginaries as a creative source has been expanded by (Leff, 2010), who understands it as a *sui generis* mode of cultural being, capable of producing reality through meanings that articulate subjectivities, emotions, rationalities, and practices within a community. From this perspective, reality is only possible because of the social imaginaries that constitute it. This emphasis on the symbolic productivity of social imaginaries is also shared by Martínez & Muñoz (2009), who consider social imaginaries to be factual worlds of life, relatively conscious constructions that emerge from collective interactions and experiences. Similarly, Cuéllar & Andrade

 

(2019) highlight that social imaginaries acquire relative autonomy and are constituted around community events, relationships, and experiences, while García-Rodríguez (2019) proposes understanding them as ways of being, thinking, and acting that regulate social life.

Other authors articulate social imaginaries with broader structural frameworks. Bourdieu (1990) situates imaginary meanings in habitus, understood as incorporated dispositions that guide action; Giddens (2000) associates them with frameworks of social practices reproduced in the structure; and Geertz (2003) conceives them as symbolic systems that give cultural consistency to social life. From the anthropological tradition, Thompson (1995) highlights the historical and narrative dimension of shared symbols, while Salazar & Castelan (2011) link social imaginaries to common sense, understood as a way of organizing everyday life.

In the field of critical social theory, Habermas (1999) suggests that radical imaginaries fulfill a reconstructive function, allowing resistance to the processes of colonization of the world of life and restoring horizons of meaning from deep cultural roots. This capacity for resistance and creativity is essential for understanding social processes in contexts of rapid change, such as contemporary migration.

From another perspective, Pintos (2005) develops a theoretical-methodological approach that understands social imaginaries as socially constructed schemes, based on the relevance/opacity code, which guide perception, interpretation, and intervention in social reality. For this author, the theory of social imaginaries is still under construction, precisely because the references and meanings of contemporary societies are constantly changing. Pintos proposes three areas of contingency for analyzing social imaginaries: a) The distinctive system: politics, science, and religion; b) The organizations that embody the institutionalization of the system; and c) The interactions between individuals. This framework is particularly useful for understanding phenomena such as migration, which is simultaneously shaped by macro-institutional structures, organizational practices, and subjective experiences.

Social imaginaries surrounding migration are also expressed in the way people attribute meaning to human mobility. Anzaldúa (2012), from a cultural perspective, argues that young people construct meanings around migration that establish new social realities. Migration is not only a physical displacement, but also a scenario where new identities, aspirations, and representations of success, the future, and belonging are constructed. In this regard, Carretero (2004) emphasizes that social imaginaries shape the patterns through which individuals perceive space and time, which has direct implications for how migrants interpret urban territory and their own mobility trajectories.

In relation to the above, Ramírez & Aliaga (2022) asserts that imaginaries operate as a mental climate or atmosphere that permeates everyday life, integrating aesthetic, emotional, and symbolic dimensions that often go unnoticed in traditional approaches. For the author, understanding imaginaries involves grasping a "sensitive reason" that allows phenomena such as migration to be interpreted from dimensions that are not strictly rational.

Baeza's (2000) and Aravena & Baeza's (2017) perspective offers a complementary approach, understanding social imaginaries as homogenizers of ways of thinking and acting that are essential for social cohesion. Thus, social imaginaries are not the sum of individual imaginaries, but collective products that legitimize practices and values. This approach allows migration to be analyzed as a process permeated by meanings that shape expectations, aspirations, and fears in both sending and receiving communities.

For his part, Randazzo (2012) argues that reality is perceived differently according to social imaginaries, which implies the coexistence of multiple truths and versions of the migratory phenomenon. In this sense, Cegarra (2012) elaborates on this idea by stating that imaginaries should be understood as repertoires of culturally legitimized meanings rather than precise concepts; these repertoires allow us to interpret behaviors, validate values, and give narrative coherence to complex phenomena such as human mobility.

In the field of migration studies, mobility cannot be explained solely by structural factors, but also by the social imaginaries of the place of origin and destination, family experiences, community narratives, and expectations about urban life. In this way, urban imaginaries can operate as spaces for projecting the future, social mobility, or escape, while rural spaces can be imagined as traditional, limited, or even protective, all according to socially shared meanings. Thus, migration is constructed simultaneously as a social practice and as a symbolic act, inscribed in frameworks of social imaginaries that give meaning to the decision to leave, stay, or return.

Migration, in fact, is established and transformed within the three areas identified by Pintos (2005): *in the system*, through public discourse on development, modernity, and progress; *in organizations*, through migration policies, educational programs, or institutional mobility networks; and *in interactions*, through personal experiences, family ties, and shared stories. At all these levels, social imaginaries operate that allow us to understand the symbolic appeal that certain destinations acquire, or why certain trajectories are more highly valued, or how migratory success becomes a legitimized ideal within a community. In this way, social imaginaries allow us to understand both the individual experience of migrants and the cultural and symbolic reproduction of migration in society.

**Migration Imaginaries of Youth**

 

The analysis and understanding of youth migration involves articulating two dimensions and processes: "economic structures" and "sociocultural meanings." Classic *push-pull* explanations, the new economy of migration, and Harris-Todaro models define material conditions (unemployment, low agricultural profitability, and violence) that drive young people to migrate. However, this interpretation must be related to approaches that emphasize the collective construction of social imaginaries: expectations and desires that make departure viable as a life project (De Jesús et al., 2019; Guresci, 2022; Mina & Téllez, 2022). These positions converge in recognizing migratory selectivity: young people's decisions are contingent on real (economic) opportunities and symbolic horizons (aspirations), so any analysis and interpretation that ignores one or the other approach is incomplete.

Theoretical contributions on social imaginaries (Baeza, 2000; Castoriadis, 1993, 2007; Pintos, 2005) allow us to conceptualize how young people interpret the city or foreign countries as "spaces of possibility": horizons of modernity, employment, and recognition. These are not only individual constructions but also repertoires shared and legitimized by the community, the family, and the media (instituted imaginaries), and at the same time, sources of innovation and change (instituting imaginaries). Contemporary authors show that migratory imaginaries integrate economic and affective dimensions: migration is simultaneously a material strategy and an emotional project (Castaneda-Camey, 2014). Consequently, policies that only correct material "causes" without engaging with the meanings and desires that sustain migratory projects are unlikely to produce sustainable retention.

From the perspective of *rural sociology*, the notion of deagrarization and new rurality (Camarero et al., 2020; Sandoval et al., 2022) sheds light on how the loss of centrality of agriculture and the emergence of hybrid activities are reshaping young people's trajectories: the reduction in agricultural opportunities, combined with the precariousness of wage labor and the lack of public investment, creates structural incentives for young people to leave the countryside for the cities; However, the same processes generate new repertoires of identity and practices of resistance that do not necessarily lead to total cultural abandonment, but rather to the hybridization of life projects. This process of intermediation responds to the tension between a countryside that no longer sustains youth reproduction and a rurality that refuses to be defined solely by scarcity.

From the perspective of *migration and ecology*, a field of theoretical convergence opens up between climate change, food security, and youth mobility, where environmental degradation, climate variability, and loss of agricultural income act as multiplier effects of the migratory process, and migration itself produces transformations in practices productive, such as the loss of agrobiodiversity in family farming (Guresci, 2022; Morales et al., 2024). In line with political-ecological theory, these perspectives insist that retention policies must incorporate adaptation and productive resilience measures in order to be effective.

According to the position on *youth migration and informal work,* in contexts with limited formal opportunities, self-employment, entrepreneurship out of necessity, and the informal economy become the predominant mechanisms of urban labor market insertion for rural youth (Mendoza et al., 2020; Tulibaleka & Katunze, 2023). Public policies that emphasize entrepreneurship without support have also not shown sustained effectiveness in retaining young people in rural areas, suggesting the need for comprehensive interventions that combine relevant technical education, access to credit, and dynamic local markets.

*Ethnographic and phenomenological studies* introduce the experiential dimension, that is, youth migration transforms identities through processes of learning, loss, and affective recomposition that occur before, during, and after displacement. Consistent with Bourdieu's theory of habitus, these studies show that embodied dispositions (values about work, family, and success) mediate the perception of opportunities and effective access to them, and that the migratory experience produces hybrid habitus that will reconstitute social practices in places of origin and destination. Thus, youth migration is both a strategic adaptation and a formative process that reconfigures generational expectations (Bravo & Martínez, 2021; Daza, 2020; De Jesús et al., 2019).

Another theoretical position regarding *networks, social capital, and technologies*, according to which network theory and digital media studies (Soto & Visa, 2017; Tulibaleka & Katunze, 2023) demonstrate that family and community networks and online platforms operate as relational infrastructures that facilitate information, accommodation, and work, while simultaneously constructing social imaginaries by which the risks and benefits of migration are measured. Evidence from Africa and Latin America suggests that digitization increases the capacity for self-employment and access to informal markets, but does not replace the need for viable public policies. Therefore, theoretical discussions on structured agency must explicitly incorporate the mediating role of technologies in the reproduction and transformation of young people's migration projects.

The perspective on *gender and youth migration* articulates positions that converge in pointing out critical differences: male and female migration are shaped by different pressures, opportunities, and gender norms, which affect social outcomes (Mina & Téllez, 2022; París, 2010). While male migration may be linked to initiation rituals and status accumulation, young women more often use education and mobility as strategies for autonomy, even though they face greater barriers and risks. Theoretically, this situation requires us to question any approach that treats youth as a homogeneous category and to incorporate intersectional analyses based on age, gender, and ethnicity in our understanding of youth migration.

 

From the perspective of *indigenous youth and decoloniality,* a theoretical counter-discourse is proposed in response to assimilationist interpretations, whereby migration can be a space for cultural vindication, the creation of symbolic capital, and political reorganization among young people (Mendoza et al., 2020). In line with critical theory, this perspective argues that migration does not necessarily imply cultural loss; on the contrary, it can become a strategy for visibility and collective mobilization that reproduces belonging from new geographies and hybrid practices. Furthermore, this perspective calls for policies that recognize identity pluralities and do not instrumentalize youth retention as the sole goal.

In the field of *protection and mental health*, the literature on unaccompanied young people converges with studies on transit and settlement in pointing to the need to focus interventions throughout the migration trajectory: pre-departure, transit, and post-arrival (Garcia & Birman, 2022). Theoretically, these approaches combine trauma models with ecological approaches to development, arguing that protective factors (family networks and educational aspirations) mitigate risks, while exposure to violence and exploitation increases vulnerabilities that require integrated responses: protection, health, and education. These positions emphasize that policy must address both structural causes and sociocultural and psychosocial effects.

Analyses of *demographic impact and population composition* are part of the broader discussion on the social consequences of youth migration, i.e., the departure of young people alters the age and sex structure in their territories of origin, affects the reproduction of productive knowledge, and can create gaps that influence the sustainability of agricultural activities (Stern & Corona, 1985). The theoretical discussion links these effects to the notions of social reproduction and rural sustainability, and suggests that responses should consider strategies for generational renewal and the valorization of youth labor in the countryside.

The position on *youth work and self-employment* discusses the tension between entrepreneurship promoted by public policies and "entrepreneurship out of necessity" that stems from the lack of formal employment (Mina & Téllez, 2022; Tulibaleka & Katunze, 2023). The theoretical analysis and debate focuses on the articulation between the political economy of development and studies on youth agency. Policies that favor microcredit or isolated training reproduce the welfare logic if they are not inserted into real markets and sustainable production chains; therefore, the theoretical analysis must integrate both the material dimension (labor demand) and the sociocultural understanding of youth aspirations.

According to Soto & Visa (2017), approaches to *media representations and symbolic construction* converge in showing how television and digital networks not only reflect but also produce narratives of "migratory success," that is, the media create models of life that influence young people's decisions; digital platforms allow for self-representations that can legitimize migratory routes and strategies. This theoretical convergence between cultural studies and communication sociology suggests that any informational or educational intervention must consider the formative power of media imaginaries.

The debate on *return and reintegration* provides a complementary position, in the sense that return is not simply geographical reversal but a complex process of symbolic and material reintegration, with tensions between expectations generated by migration and local realities (De Jesús et al., 2019). Analytically, this calls for the articulation of public policy approaches that recognize the ambivalence of return: prestige and disconnection, and design mechanisms that leverage learning and remittances for local productive projects.

However, as a result of the analysis and debate between the various theoretical positions regarding the migratory imaginaries of youth, it is argued that the analysis and understanding of youth migration involves a multilevel (structural, relational, and symbolic) and multidimensional (economic, sociological, identity, ecological, and psychosocial) process. In this sense, four main areas of theoretical debate have emerged that articulate contemporary research on youth migration. First, the relationship between structural elements and symbolic agency. Second, the tension between retention policies (rural investment and relevant education) and protection and reintegration policies. Third, the debate on identity and cultural hybridization: assimilationism and sociocultural resignification. And fourth, methodologically, how to incorporate interdisciplinary approaches that combine economics, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and public policy to address the complexity of the phenomenon of youth migration.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted using a qualitative methodological approach, given that the purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the units or categories of analysis linked to the phenomenon of youth migration from rural to urban areas in the high Andean communities of Puno, Peru. This approach allows social phenomena to be examined from the perspective of those who experience them, placing them in their usual environment and taking into account the particularities of the study context (Hernández et al., 2014).

The methodological design adopted is interpretive phenomenology (Duque & Aristizábal, 2019), which

 

focuses on understanding the experiences of individuals, analyzing how these people make sense of their daily experiences and practices. In addition, it seeks to explore and articulate the meanings, experiences, and commitments that people have with respect to a given phenomenon (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). Based on this design, the study sought to interpret the subjective experiences of young migrants, emphasizing their social imaginaries and practices, referring to their feelings, thoughts, meanings, and actions regarding their migration project and experience. These dimensions shaped the units of analysis, while the units of observation were made up of rural young people (men and women) from the district of Orurillo in Puno, Peru, who have had at least one migratory experience.

### Participating Actors and Research Techniques

The study sample is non-probabilistic, and the sampling technique applied is chain or snowball sampling, whereby key informants are identified gradually until the data requirements for the research are met (Hernández et al., 2014). After identifying a key informant, they were asked if they knew other young people who had migrated at some point and who could provide relevant data on the research topic. Once contacted, they were included in the study. In this way, we worked with 20 young migrants: 10 men and 10 women who met the following criteria: born in the district of Orurillo, between 18 and 29 years of age, and young people with migration experience.

The techniques applied in data collection were document review, which allowed us to identify previous research to clarify objectives, compare perspectives, categorize, construct the theoretical framework, and identify unexplored areas (Martínez-Corana et al., 2023); secondly, semi- structured interviews were used, a technique that allowed data to be collected through flexible conversation with guiding questions that could be adapted to the situation or context of the interview (Díaz et al., 2013); Finally, we used focus groups, a qualitative research technique that allowed young people to discuss their migration experiences in high Andean communities, under the guidance of a moderator (Valles, 1999). Thus, the instruments used for data collection were: Bibliographic review sheets, which, according to Santana (2008), are used in the initial phase of research to consult books or primary sources that form the basis of the analysis and argumentation of the work; the interview guide, which according to Bracho (2007) is an unstructured tool that follows a list of general areas such as guiding questions, in order to have greater organization in the interview; and the focus group guide, which consists of planning of the debate, which includes a list of open questions and discussion topics to guide the moderator (Valles, 1999).

### Data Analysis Procedure

Data processing and analysis was carried out in five stages: *First*, the interviews were audio recorded[1] and manually transcribed into Word documents, which were then read and edited by the research team to assess the quality of the data collected. In addition to the interview data, the focus groups were similarly transcribed into Word documents. *Second,* the qualitative data from the interviews and focus groups were processed using Atlas.ti software (Barquín et al., 2022; Quispe-Mamani & Ayamamani-Collanqui, 2023; San Martín, 2016), which allowed for the systematization, coding, and categorization of the qualitative data generated from the central theme, whose conceptualization and integration in the form of theory enabled the interpretation of the phenomenon studied (Pertegal-Felices et al., 2020; Quispe-Mamani et al., 2023).

*Third,* through the strategy of constant comparative analysis and thanks to the coding process, the research team identified 773 citations, distributed and grouped into four main categories, previously identified, and into a differentiated number of emerging subcategories of analysis. *Fourth,* after identifying representative citations for each emerging subcategory of analysis, semantic networks were designed for each of the four main categories of analysis. *Fifth,* based on those semantic networks, the results of the study were analyzed, discussed, and interpreted using qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis techniques (Cáceres, 2003; Sayago, 2014).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Young People's Feelings about the Migration Experience

As a result of empirical research, according to Figure 1, seven subcategories of analysis have emerged regarding the emotional dimension of young people's migration experience, which are analyzed below. With regard to *"nostalgia for the break with the place of origin"* (E=68), the results show that the youth migration experience is marked by a symbolic and emotional break with the place of origin, particularly with the rural environment. This finding is consistent with the notion of social imaginaries as factual worlds of life (Martínez & Muñoz, 2009), where the place of origin represents not only a physical space, but also a horizon of meaning laden with memories, affections, and belongings. From Castoriadis' perspective (1993, 2007), nostalgia can be interpreted as a tension between the

[1] Authorization or informed consent for the recording of interviews was obtained and recorded prior to each interview.

 

instituted imaginary: the countryside as a space of roots, tradition, and community, and the instituting imaginary, which drives migration as a project of personal transformation. This ambivalence reveals that the decision to migrate does not omit the symbolic link with one's origins, but rather re-signifies it. In this regard, Carretero (2004) argues that imaginaries structure the perception of space and time, which explains why the rural past acquires greater emotional density after the urban experience.

Likewise, from the perspective of contemporary rural sociology, the processes of deagrarization reinforce that nostalgia by weakening the material conditions that sustained youth reproduction in the countryside (Camarero et al., 2020; Sandoval et al., 2022). However, nostalgia is not limited to passive longing, but can become a symbolic resource for projecting returns, maintaining links, or redefining hybrid identities, as Randazzo (2012) argues about the coexistence of multiple imagined realities of migration.

With regard to *"access to information networks and multicultural integration"* (E=51), the results show that family, community, and digital networks play a central role in shaping young people's perceptions of migration, providing information, integration, and expectations of success. This finding is consistent with the perspective of networks and social capital, which conceives of migration as a relational rather than an individual process (Soto & Visa, 2017; Tulibaleka & Katunze, 2023). In the words of Pintos (2005), these networks operate as schemes of relevance/opacity, as they highlight urban opportunities while obscuring structural risks, producing a climate of migratory plausibility. In dialogue with Baeza (2000), networks not only transmit information, but also standardize expectations, legitimizing migration as a socially valued trajectory.

For his part, Ramírez & Aliaga (2022) contributes the notion of 'mental atmosphere', which is useful for understanding how multicultural integration does not occur solely through objective insertion, but through the sensitive internalization of new cultural codes. However, this integration is uneven and selective, because networks tend to reproduce ethnic or community niches, reinforcing processes of hybridization rather than full assimilation, as suggested by decolonial approaches to indigenous youth (Mendoza et al., 2020).

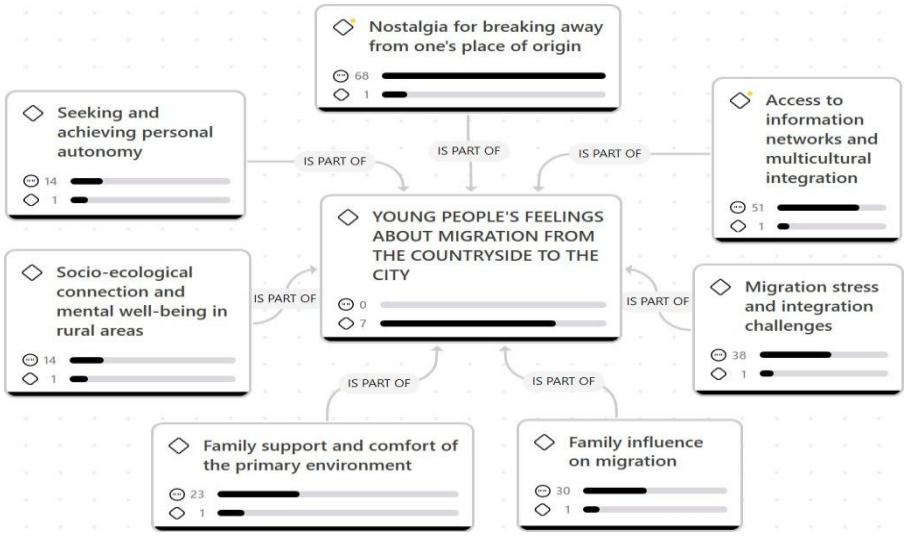


**Figure 1:** Young people's feelings about migration from rural areas to cities
*Source: Own elaboration in Atlas.ti v.25*

However, the migratory experience involves *"stress and integration challenges"* (E=38). High levels of psychosocial stress stem from job insecurity, discrimination, and the breakdown of primary networks. This result is consistent with ecological and migratory trajectory approaches, which emphasize the need to analyze the migratory experience in its different phases: pre-departure, transit, and post-arrival (Garcia & Birman, 2022). According to Bourdieu's habitus theory (1990), stress can be interpreted as the mismatch between dispositions incorporated in the field and the demands of the urban space, producing what some studies describe as fractured or hybrid habitus (Daza, 2020; De Jesús et al., 2019). This tension intensifies when urban imaginaries, constructed as spaces of opportunity, collide with real experiences of exclusion. According to Habermas (1999), this situation allows us to interpret stress as an effect of processes of colonization of the world of life, where the instrumental logics of the urban market erode the cultural frames of reference of young migrants. Thus, migratory stress is not only individual, but also structural and symbolic, reinforcing the need for comprehensive policies that address both causes and psycho- sociocultural effects.

Given the structural vulnerability of rural areas, there is a *"family influence on migration"* (E=30), that is, the family acts as a decisive agent and the space for the symbolic institutionalization of young people's migratory imaginaries,

 

either by encouraging departure or legitimizing it as a strategy for social mobility, and by transmitting narratives of success, sacrifice, and overcoming adversity (Castoriadis, 2007). This finding is also consistent with the new economics of migration, which conceives of the decision to migrate as a family strategy and not merely an individual one (Mina & Téllez, 2022). However, this family influence is not homogeneous. Gender approaches show that family pressures and support vary according to sex, reproducing inequalities in youth migration trajectories (Mina & Téllez, 2022; París, 2010). Thus, the family is simultaneously a source of support and a mechanism of symbolic control.

Consistent with the above, *"family support and comfort in the primary environment"* (E=23) is the key protective factor against social and emotional vulnerability before and after migration. This finding, according to protection and mental health approaches, emphasizes the role of primary networks as risk buffers (Garcia & Birman, 2022). In Leff (2010) terms, the family environment can be understood as a space for the production of meaning that integrates rationality, emotion, and culture. In this framework, the comfort of the primary environment is not only associated with material well-being but also with the possibility of maintaining symbolic continuity in the face of change. However, the results also suggest that this support can weaken over time, especially in contexts of prolonged urban informality (Mendoza et al., 2020). This reinforces the idea that youth well-being depends on the articulation between family networks and effective public policies, avoiding the overload of the private sphere.

On the other hand, in the migratory experience, young people reveal the *"socio-ecological bond and mental well-being in the countryside"* (E=14), that is, the countryside is imagined by many young people as a space of emotional well-being and socio-ecological balance, in contrast to the stressful urban experience. This result is consistent with studies on migration, ecology, and climate change (Guresci, 2022; Morales et al., 2024). For political-ecological theory, the link with rural areas is not only productive but also identity-related and symbolic. Furthermore, Castoriadis (1993) allows us to interpret this link as part of the established imaginary that associates nature, community, and stability. However, the loss of agricultural profitability puts pressure on this imaginary, generating contradictions between symbolic well-being and material viability. Therefore, this finding reinforces the need for retention policies that integrate ecological resilience and youth well-being, overcoming purely economic views of rural development.

Finally, with regard to the emotional dimension, the *"search for and achievement of personal autonomy"* (E=14), youth migration is configured as a central strategy for the search for personal autonomy, social recognition, and identity redefinition. This finding is supported by theories of youth agency, which conceive of migration as a formative process and not merely an adaptive one (Bravo & Martínez, 2021). In this sense, according to Castoriadis (2007), this search can be analyzed as an expression of the instituting imaginary, where young people produce new meanings of success, independence, and future. In the case of young women, this autonomy takes on a particularly emancipatory character, although it is fraught with greater risks (París, 2010). However, the achievement of autonomy is uneven and often precarious, especially when it occurs in informal labor markets (Tulibaleka & Katunze, 2023). This highlights the structural tension between symbolic aspirations and material conditions, confirming that youth migration is a multilevel and multidimensional phenomenon. Therefore, migratory imaginaries operate as symbolic matrices that articulate emotions, expectations, networks, and structures, giving meaning to the youth migration experience.

**Young People's Thoughts on the Migration Experience**

To the extent that the migration experience is a reflective process, according to Figure 2, six subcategories of analysis have emerged during the research process that allow us to analyze and understand the dynamics of the migration process among young people. These subcategories reveal the social imaginaries constructed during the youth migration experience. In this sense, we identify *"ambivalence in the projection of urban life"* (E=67), that is, according to the results, urban life is imagined by young people as a space of both opportunities and risks. This ambivalence confirms that urban imaginaries are not univocal constructions, but rather repertoires of contradictory meanings that coexist in the youth experience. For Castoriadis (1993, 2007) this tension reflects the conflict between established imaginaries: the city as a symbol of progress, modernity, and success; and emerging imaginaries, which arise when concrete experience questions these promises.

In this regard, Carretero (2004) argues that imaginaries organize the perception of space and time, which explains why the city is projected as a possible future, albeit one fraught with uncertainty. For his part, Randazzo (2012) asserts that this coexistence of interpretations reveals the plurality of "truths" about migration: for some young people, the city represents social mobility; for others, precariousness and exclusion. Thus, ambivalence does not weaken the migration project, but rather makes it reflective, integrating expectations and fears into the same narrative.

 

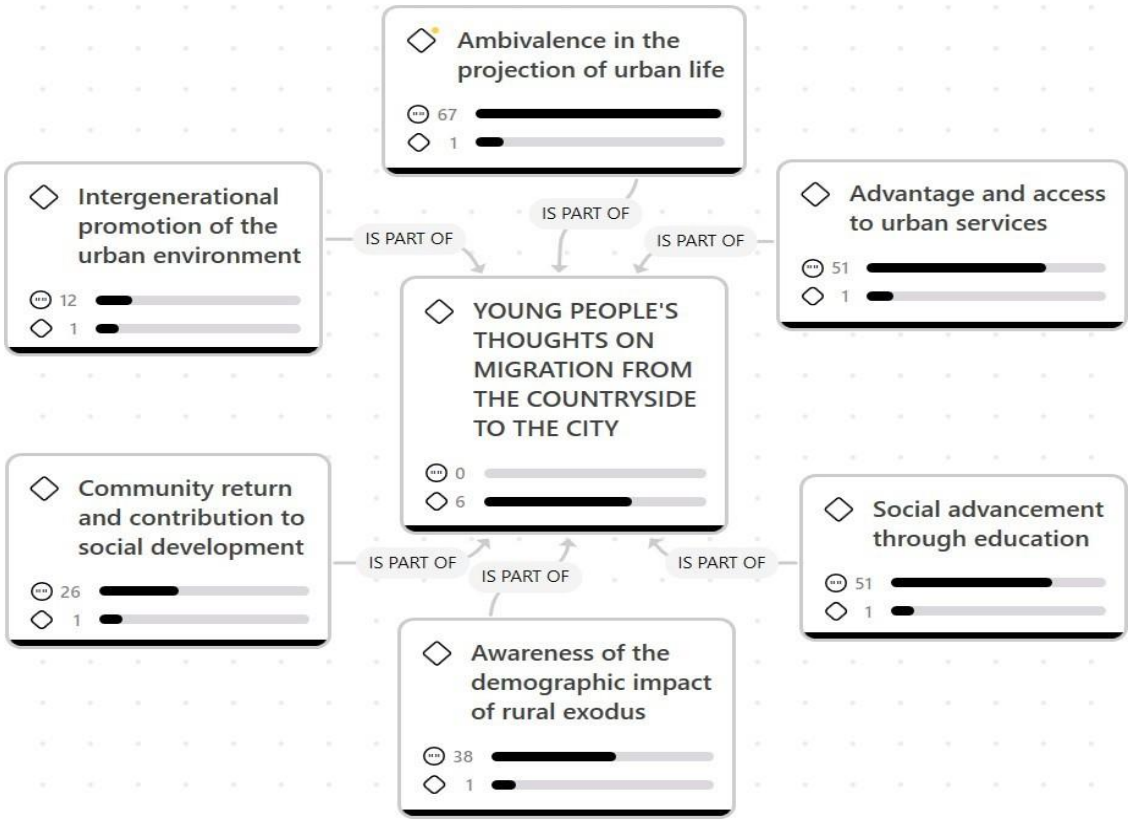


**Figure 2.** Young people's thoughts on migration from the countryside to the city
*Source: Own elaboration in Atlas.ti v.25*

Now, one of those established imaginaries of urban opportunity is *"advantage and access to urban services"* (E=51), such as education, health, transportation, and connectivity, which constitute the city's main symbolic attractions. This finding is associated with the notion of social imaginaries as mental climates that integrate rational and sensitive dimensions Ramírez & Aliaga (2022), where the city is imagined as a space in which material infrastructure translates into well-being and the possibility of personal development. For Pintos (2005), these services acquire relevance within the relevance/opacity code: urban advantages are highlighted while the real barriers to access are made invisible, especially for young people involved in the informal sector. In addition, Baeza (2000) complement this analysis by arguing that these imaginaries are collective and homogenizing, legitimized by public discourse and shared experiences, which reinforces the symbolic centrality of the city over the rural environment.

Another of the city's established imaginaries is *"social advancement through education"* (E=51), that is, education is imagined as the main mechanism for social advancement, especially in the urban context. This finding is consistent with approaches that conceive of youth migration as both a material and emotional project (Castaneda-Camey, 2014). The city is symbolically constructed as a space where education is accessible and valued, which translates into social recognition. According to Bourdieu (1990), this expectation can be interpreted as a strategy for accumulating cultural capital, although its effectiveness depends on the structural conditions of insertion. For Giddens (2000), these aspirations are reproduced within structural frameworks that, while promising mobility, also generate new inequalities. Thus, the results confirm that education functions as an instituting imaginary, a driver of change, but one that is not exempt from frustration when meritocratic promises are not fulfilled.

On the other hand, simultaneously with those imaginaries established around migration from the countryside to the city, young people's imaginations produce an *"awareness of the demographic effect of rural exodus"* (E=38), particularly population aging and the loss of productive force in their communities of origin. This result is directly related to analyses of demographic impact and social reproduction (Stern & Corona, 1985), which warn of generational gaps in rural areas. This social imaginary of young people reveals that they are not actors detached from their territory, but rather subjects who reflect on the collective consequences of migration. Castoriadis (2007) position allows us to interpret this result as a tension between the communal "we" and the individual project of mobility. In this sense, young people's migratory imaginaries integrate an ethical and collective dimension, which complicates purely individualistic readings of the migratory phenomenon.

Consistent with the previous social imaginary, another instituting imaginary emerges, referring to *"community return and contribution to social development"* (E=26), according to which return is imagined as a future possibility of

 

contributing to community development, rather than as a simple physical return. This result is linked to debates on return and reintegration, which conceive of return as a symbolic and material process fraught with ambivalence (De Jesús et al., 2019). According to Habermas (1999), this orientation can be interpreted as a reconstructive function of radical imaginaries, capable of rearticulating horizons of meaning in the face of processes of colonization of the world of life. Likewise, the perspective of indigenous youth and decoloniality reinforces the idea that return can become a strategy for cultural revaluation and social reorganization, rather than a migratory failure (Mendoza et al., 2020).

Finally, with regard to the rational and reflective dimension of the migratory experience, the *"intergenerational promotion of the urban environment"* (E=12) emerges, confirming the established imaginary of opportunities in the city, according to which young migrants tend to promote the urban environment among younger generations, reproducing narratives of opportunity and progress. This finding confirms that migratory imaginaries not only guide individual decisions, but are also reproduced intergenerationally as legitimized repertoires of meaning (Cegarra, 2012). For Baeza (2011) such promotion reinforces the symbolic cohesion of the urban imaginary as a desirable horizon, while Soto & Visa (2017) shed light on the role of digital media and networks in disseminating narratives of "migratory success". Thus, the city is consolidated as a normative ideal, even when the real experience is ambiguous, structurally reproducing youth migration flows.

**Social Meanings of Youth on the Migratory Experience**

With regard to the symbolic and meaningful dimension of the youth migration experience, according to Figure 3, seven subcategories of analysis emerged during the study that allow us to account for the meaning and significance of rural-urban migration among young people in the high Andean communities of Puno, Peru. On the one hand, the imaginaries of *"attraction to centrality and urban services"* (E=46) are identified, according to which the city is imagined by young people as a space of symbolic centrality, where opportunities, services, and social recognition converge. This attraction does not respond solely to a rational logic of access to material goods, but to a shared horizon of meaning that endows the urban with positive connotations associated with progress and modernity.

According to Castoriadis (1993, 2007), this phenomenon represents the crystallization of an established imaginary, in which the city is constituted as the hegemonic reference point for development, while the countryside is relegated to meanings of backwardness. This imaginary is socially reproduced through institutions, public discourse, and community experiences, as Pintos (2005) argues in his multilevel analysis of social imaginaries. Furthermore, for Carretero (2004), urban centrality not only reorders physical space, but also the perception of vital time: migrating is interpreted as "advancing" in one's biographical trajectory. In turn, Ramírez & Aliaga (2022) expands on this interpretation by stating that this attraction operates as an emotional and symbolic atmosphere that permeates young people's daily lives, reinforcing the idea that "being in the city" is equivalent to "being someone".

The second subcategory of emerging analysis is consistent with the established social imaginaries of the countryside, that is, with the *"precariousness and low quality of rural health and education services"* (E=45). This is reaffirmed as a negative imaginary of the territory of origin, which legitimizes migration as a rational and symbolic strategy. According to Baeza (2000, 2011) these imaginaries function as social homologators, producing collective consensus on the structural inferiority of rural areas. In the approaches of Bourdieu (1990) and Giddens (2000) repeated experiences of institutional exclusion are incorporated into the youth habitus as dispositions that guide migratory action. It is not only a question of objective deficiencies, but also of shared meanings that shape the idea that "staying" implies stagnation. Furthermore, for Pintos (2005), these imaginaries are structured under the code of relevance/opacity: while urban services appear visible and accessible, rural services are perceived as opaque and inefficient. Thus, migration is established as a legitimate social practice within the community.

On the other hand, another established social construct emerges in rural areas: *"rural productive decline and scarce economic opportunities"* (E=34), which is interpreted not only as an economic crisis, but also as a loss of meaning in agricultural work. From the perspective of rural sociology, the notion of deagrarization is related to social imaginaries by showing how agriculture ceases to be a viable identity reference for young people (Camarero et al., 2020; Sandoval et al., 2022). In the words of Leff (2010), given that social imaginaries produce social reality, young people, by imagining the countryside as unproductive, reinforce the idea of its material abandonment. This process is amplified by ecological and productive factors (Guresci, 2022), which act as symbolic multipliers of the decision to migrate, integrating economy, environment, and subjectivity.

 

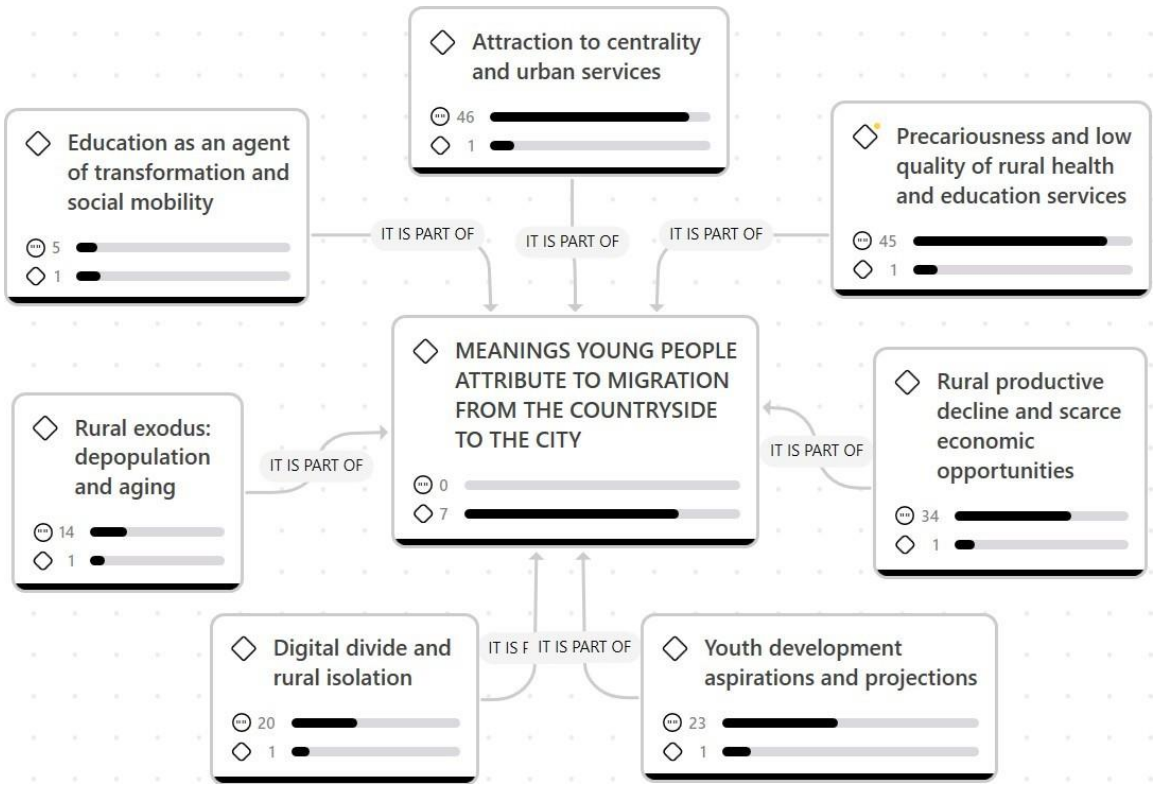


**Figure 3.** Meanings attributed by young people to migration from the countryside to the city
*Source: Own elaboration in Atlas.ti v.25*

As a product of previous social imaginaries, *"youth development aspirations and projections"* (E=23) emerge as a central axis in the construction of migratory imaginaries, because migration is conceived as a life project, where economic expectations, social recognition, and personal fulfillment are articulated. According to Castoriadis (1993), these youth aspirations are shaped in the instituting imaginary, capable of breaking with inherited trajectories. In this regard, Anzaldúa (2012) and Castaneda-Camey (2014) agree that youth migration is not only a material strategy but also an emotional project, charged with hope and meaning. For Bourdieu (1990) these aspirations are mediated by prior social dispositions, although the migratory experience produces hybrid habitus, reconfiguring generational expectations (De Jesús et al., 2019). Thus, the results converge with a non-deterministic view of migration, where youth agency occupies a central place.

The reality of rural-urban migration is reinforced by the *"digital divide and rural isolation"* (E=20), which reflects social perceptions of structural rural exclusion. In other words, young people perceive technological isolation as a form of symbolic disconnection from the contemporary world, reinforcing the idea that the future lies outside rural areas. In this regard, Soto & Visa (2017) show that technologies not only facilitate migration, but also produce imaginaries of success, amplifying urban and migratory narratives. In the words of Pintos (2005) digital platforms act as symbolic organizations that mediate between system and interaction, reinforcing the relevance of the urban. In other words, digitization does not replace public policies, but it does profoundly transform the way young people imagine their life possibilities.

Based on the above, young people form negative social imaginaries that *"rural exodus leads to depopulation and aging"* (E=14), inevitably producing the imaginary of rural decline. For this reason, Stern & Corona (1985) warn that this phenomenon alters the demographic structure and compromises the social reproduction of the countryside. From Baeza's perspective (2011), this process can be interpreted as a self-fulfilling prophecy; that is, by imagining the countryside as a place with no future, its abandonment is legitimized, reinforcing social perceptions and practices that deepen depopulation. However, decolonial approaches invite us to problematize this narrative, suggesting that migration can generate new forms of belonging and territorial articulation, beyond definitive abandonment (Mendoza et al., 2020).

Finally, in the symbolic and meaningful dimension, *"education as an agent of transformation and social mobility"* (E=5) emerges as an ambivalent concept: on the one hand, it is conceived as a means of social mobility; and on the other, as a mechanism that encourages people to leave the territory. Bourdieu (1990) warns that this double meaning reproduces inequalities, but can also transform them. In this latter sense, Mina & Téllez (2022) argue that education

 

is central to youth migration projects, especially for women, as it articulates autonomy and recognition. For Habermas (1999), education can fulfill a reconstructive function, allowing for a reimagining of development from the perspective of rural life. Thus, education is configured as a strategic node where imaginaries of progress, public policies, and youth aspirations converge. However, youth migration is a multilevel and multidimensional phenomenon, where social imaginaries operate as mediators between objective structures and subjective decisions.

**Actions of Local Actors on Youth Migration**

The social imaginaries regarding the decisions and actions of local actors around youth migration, according to Figure 4, translate into eight subcategories of analysis that have emerged in the study. The first refers to the *"lack of job opportunities and professional development"* (E=27), which evidences and shapes the structural imaginary of rural stagnation, legitimizing youth migration as a necessary alternative. From classical approaches to migration, this situation can be interpreted as a push factor; however, the framework of social imaginaries allows us to delve deeper into its symbolic dimension. Thus, Castoriadis (1993, 2007) argues that societies produce meanings that guide collective action. In this case, the lack of employment is not only an objective condition, but also a socially instituted meaning that associates rural work with precariousness and a lack of future prospects. According to Bourdieu (1990) these perceptions are incorporated into the youth habitus, shaping dispositions that guide the search for recognition and mobility outside the territory. For Pintos (2005) the scarcity of job opportunities is part of the system and organizations, where the opacity of local opportunities contrasts with the symbolic relevance of the urban market, reinforcing migration as a legitimate social practice.

Given the above situation, young people's social imagination is shaped by the *"need to promote youth employment and self-employment"* (E=27), which reflects local awareness of the need to address the structural causes of migration. However, the results show that these actions are perceived as insufficient or unsustainable, reinforcing the perception that the countryside cannot guarantee the social reproduction of young people. In the context of informality, youth work based on self-employment appears to be a strategy for survival rather than development (Tulibaleka & Katunze, 2023). This reality, warn Mina & Téllez (2022), means that policies focused solely on entrepreneurship, without articulation to real markets, reproduce welfare logic. These limited initiatives fail to consolidate themselves as instituting imaginaries capable of transforming the perception of the territory (Castoriadis, 2007); on the contrary, they reinforce the idea that economic success continues to be associated with urban space.

Furthermore, young people's imaginations are shaped by the *"need for recreational, social, and safe spaces"* (E=27), because the lack of such spaces is a symbolically relevant factor in their decision to migrate. In other words, young people migrate not only for employment or education, but also in search of life experiences and social interactions that they consider to be absent in rural areas. This result, based on Ramírez & Aliaga's (2022) notion of "mental atmosphere," implies understanding the lack of meeting places and safety, which produces an emotional climate of isolation and boredom that reinforces urban imaginaries associated with freedom and dynamism. Likewise, Martínez & Muñoz (2009) point out that imaginaries are constructed in everyday life; therefore, the lack of social infrastructure limits the production of positive meanings about rural permanence. For Baeza (2011) this lack weakens social cohesion and erodes the collective imaginaries that could legitimize youth rootedness.

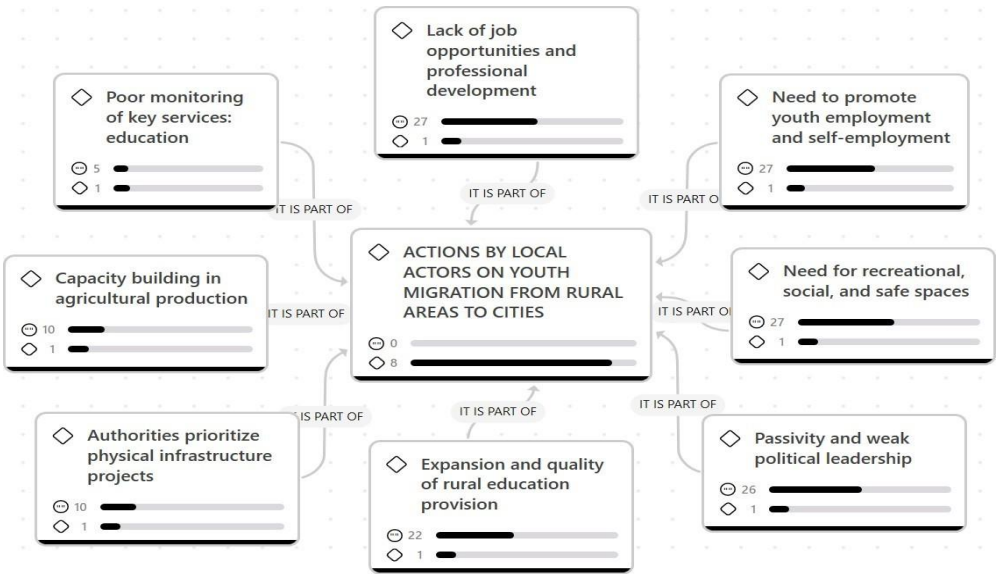


**Figure 4.** Actions taken by local actors regarding the migration of young people from rural areas to cities
*Source: Own elaboration in Atlas.ti v.25*

 

However, in response to the demands made by young people, they perceive a worrying *"passivity and lack of political leadership"* (E=26) on the part of local authorities, which is interpreted as a sign of institutional neglect, reinforcing young people's mistrust of the future of the region. This perception has not only administrative effects, but also deeply symbolic ones. According to Giddens (2000), these practices of political and institutional inaction reproduce social structures that reinforce the perception of the rural world as irrelevant. In Habermas's terms (1999) the absence of leadership limits the possibility of generating radical imaginaries with reconstructive capacity, which would allow for the mobilization of collective projects as alternatives to migration. Thus, local politics loses symbolic relevance, becoming opaque to young people, who direct their expectations toward other spaces of power and decision-making (Pintos, 2005).

The other demand from young people is the *"expansion and quality of rural education"* (E=22), as a central demand and as an ambivalent imaginary. On the one hand, its transformative potential is recognized; on the other, it is assumed that higher quality education may facilitate migration. In this regard, Bourdieu (1990) warns that education is a field where inequalities are reproduced and contested. For Mina & Téllez (2022), the results show that education is conceived as the main route to social mobility for young people, even when this means leaving the territory. Meanwhile, for Habermas (1999) education could fulfill a reconstructive function if it is linked to territorial projects; however, when it is disconnected from the rural productive and cultural context, it reinforces urban imaginaries of success and progress.

In contrast to the above, the social imagination of young people identifies that *"authorities prioritize physical infrastructure projects"* (E=10), which is interpreted as a limited action, focused on the visible, but disconnected from the needs of young people. This finding is consistent with that of Pintos (2005) who points out that public policies tend to emphasize what is materially relevant, rendering symbolic and relational dimensions invisible. Thus, from the perspective of social imaginaries, infrastructure without social and productive projects fails to become a meaningful reference point for young people (Castoriadis, 1993); on the contrary, it reinforces the perception that local development is superficial and not very inclusive. For his part, Baeza (2011) argues that these fragmented actions weaken institutional legitimacy and do not contribute to the construction of collective imaginaries of the future.

On the other hand, one of the strategic demands for retaining young people in rural areas is the *"development of agricultural production skills"* (E=10), which is identified as a necessary but insufficient action in the face of structural changes in rural areas. From the perspective of rural sociology, deagrarization (Camarero et al., 2020) explains why these initiatives are not always attractive to young people. As Leff (2010) argued, symbolic productivity implies that when agriculture is imagined as a low-prestige and highly vulnerable activity, even training programs lose their meaning. However, political-ecological approaches suggest that, when linked to resilience and diversification strategies, these skills could be redefined as viable alternatives (Guresci, 2022). In short, in the words of Castoriadis (2007), there is a clear tension between established imaginaries of agriculture as backwardness and the possibility of instituting imaginaries oriented towards a new rurality.

Finally, the *"poor monitoring of key services: education"* (E=5) reinforces the perception of state neglect and reproduces imaginaries of territorial inequality. According to Randazzo (2012) this situation reflects how different realities are perceived and experienced unequally according to dominant social imaginaries. The lack of institutional monitoring weakens confidence in rural education as a tool for local development, reinforcing its role as a springboard for migration. For Cegarra (2012) these images function as repertoires of meaning that legitimize the decision to leave in the absence of guarantees of educational quality and continuity. Therefore, the actions and inactions of local actors are part of a network of established social imaginaries that, far from counteracting youth migration, tend to reinforce it.

## CONCLUSIONS

According to the results analyzed, the youth migration experience is marked by an ambivalent emotional or non-rational structure, where nostalgia, stress, hope, and the desire for autonomy coexist. This ambivalence is not a circumstantial contradiction, but rather a structural feature of high Andean youth migration, as a process that simultaneously involves rupture and projection. Thus, migration is experienced as an emotional loss of territory and primary bonds, but also as an opportunity to reconstruct identity. Therefore, this migratory dynamic shows that feelings are not mere individual reactions, but expressions of internalized social imaginaries, produced in contexts of persistent territorial inequality.

In the cognitive and rational sphere, young people develop a reflective and critical understanding of migration, recognizing both the objective advantages of the city (services, education, and connectivity) as well as its structural risks (precariousness, competition, and exclusion). The findings confirm that migration is not thought of as an irrational escape, but rather as a socially rationalized strategy, based on urban imaginaries of progress that are,

 

however, questioned by concrete experience. This tension reveals a gap between symbolic expectations and objective structural conditions, reinforcing the idea that youth migration is a conditioned decision rather than a fully chosen one.

With regard to the symbolic dimension, the social meanings constructed by young people configure migration as a process of transition to adulthood, associated with the achievement of autonomy, recognition, and social mobility. However, these meanings do not negate the symbolic value of rural areas, which continue to be imagined as spaces of socio-emotional well-being and collective belonging. This dual meaning: the city as a horizon for the future and the countryside as a reserve of identity, confirms that young people's imaginaries of migration are hybrid and relational, and that migration does not imply an absolute rejection of one's origins, but rather a reconfiguration of the bond with them.

However, with regard to the practical dimension of decisions and actions, the results show a weak capacity for structural intervention on the part of local actors, whose actions tend to be fragmented, reactive, and poorly aligned with the aspirations of young people. The absence of sustained policies for retention, return, or rural youth development contributes to migration becoming normalized as the only viable alternative. This uncertainty between actions and omissions reveals a critical gap between youth dynamics and territorial governance, where the state and local institutions fail to transform dominant migratory imaginaries or generate real conditions for rooting.

Finally, in line with the findings revealed, it is recommended to reorient the response to the problem of rural-urban youth migration from a structural, territorial, and intergenerational approach that goes beyond isolated and welfare-based interventions. This implies articulating public policies that integrate rural socioeconomic development with local added value, strengthening relevant and contextualized education, promoting youth psychosocial well- being, and effective youth participation in territorial planning. Thus, only by transforming the socioeconomic and structural political conditions that make migration a necessity rather than a choice will it be possible to reframe young people's perceptions of migration and turn the high Andean region into a viable space for life projects, dignity, and future prospects.

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