

Between illicit economies and having a dream: Exploring rural youth aspirations and life-courses in a rural municipality in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Rural youth's aspirations and life-courses are shaped by complex interplays of external (social, economic, historical) and internal (agency-driven) factors. In rural Colombia, characterized by illicit economic pressures and a legacy of armed conflict, structural realities may constrain youth's ability to achieve transformative life trajectories. This study investigates how these influence youths' life-course decision making in a remote village. The Possible Selves and intersectionality theories guided the study by addressing overlapping social identities and power structures that shape youth's lived experiences. Employing a participatory photovoice initiative, participants led data interpretation and thematic analysis; five themes emerged: youth, ecosystem, entrepreneurship, agriculture and livestock production, and effort and joy. Findings illustrate a tension between youth aspirations—characterized by hopes for stability, education, and community engagement—and the structural constraints imposed by marginalizing economic systems and a history of internal conflict. Neoliberal and illicit economic frameworks, coupled with conflict legacies, undermine rural youth agency and curtail opportunities for meaningful participation. Under these conditions, aspirations tend toward survival oriented -goals rather than transformative social change, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion. To foster rural youth's aspirations, interventions must strengthen agency through improved access to quality education and inclusive participation in decision-making processes.

1. Introduction

This study examines the themes that shape youth perspectives on aspirations and life trajectories in a rural Colombian village, by emphasizing their own lived experiences. To achieve this, we employed photovoice as a participatory research method, actively involving young participants in both data collection and analysis.

For the last forty years, voices from the academic, the public, and the non-for-profit (NGOs) sectors have advocated for youth's inclusion in research that concern to their group's needs and problems that concern to their group's needs and problems (Arslan et al., 2021; Dickson-Hoyle et al., 2018; Joron, 2015; Krane et al., 2021; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Wulf-Andersen et al., 2021). They are a major and important group that can support and influence policymaking by sharing their experiences, ideas and knowledge to contribute to the sustainable development agenda (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015; Krane et al., 2021; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Trivelli and Morel, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020). While youth are included in data collection phases, their participation is generally limited to passive roles (informants), where

they are primarily recognized as recipients of adults' decisions (Corney et al., 2021; Krane et al., 2021; Wulf-Andersen et al., 2021).

In the case of rural, racialized or ethnic youth, their inclusion in research is mostly because of the social, demographic and economic characteristics that make them vulnerable in their specific context (Rebelo et al., 2024; Savage et al., 2021). However, this kind of engagement with youth reinforces a dispossession narrative (Joron, 2015; Leyshon, 2008; Savage et al., 2021), and has resulted in a lack of opportunities for young people to influence research goals or contribute meaningfully to shaping the direction of studies and the absence academic research experience (Iwasaki et al., 2014; Krane et al., 2021; Savage et al., 2021; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Trivelli and Morel, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020).

In addition to the limited active participation of rural youth in academic studies, both scholars and policymakers often reinforce the narrative of identifying the appropriate incentives and pathways to encourage rural youth to remain in rural areas because they are crucial players for sustaining food production and contribute to their communities (Anyidoho et al., 2012; Jiménez-Guevara, 2019; White, 2019,

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2021). This gap arises, in part, from the fact that tools used to assess aspirations typically consist of one or two broad questions mainly in rural youth surveys. Questions like "What would you like to be when you grow up?" or "What type of work would you ideally pursue?" often prompt responses that reflect a desire for secure employment outside of agriculture, reinforcing the assumption that rural youth aspire to leave or avoid farming as a livelihood (White, 2021). Therefore, academia has focused on understanding why rural youth do not want to be farmers or do not want to have a future in food production (Amon-Armah et al., 2023; Glover and Sumberg, 2020; Okali and Sumberg, 2012; Sumberg et al., 2021). This framework, rooted in an economic role, "sees young people as responsible for their own futures, and attributes their employment 'failure' to the 'poverty' of their aspirations" (White, 2021, p. 68), rather than considering a broader and holistic approach where context and social relationships play a significant role in the decision of becoming a farmer (Alrawashdeh et al., 2023; Amon-Armah et al., 2023; Arslan et al., 2019; Clendenning, 2023; Enríquez, 2017; Fox et al., 2016; Glover and Sumberg, 2020; Huijsmans et al., 2021; LaRue et al., 2021; Mausch et al., 2021; Shava and Vyas-Doorgapersad, 2022; Srinivasan and White, 2023; Sunam et al., 2024; White, 2021).

Conducting research with youth and for youth, in active and engaging roles, implies considering additional challenges that can become time and resource consuming (e.g., money, skilled experts) (Bastien and Holmarsdottir, 2015; Joron, 2015; Mitchell, 2013; Rodríguez and Brown, 2009). However, by considering and implementing qualitative tools that are integrated, engaging and emphasize on social elements (e.g., sex, age, intergenerational relationships, etc.) the responses and insights from youth are deep, more diverse and provide valuable information about youth's aspirations (LaRue et al., 2021; Rebelo et al., 2024; Savage et al., 2021; White, 2021). Including youth in research studies brings relevance and significance to the research and its impact, because it uplifts youth's knowledge and experiences within the research and facilitates intergenerational dialogues between adults and this age group (Krane et al., 2021; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Wilson et al., 2020).

Moreover, few studies on rural youth focus on life courses and aspirations while considering the concept of agency, especially in relation to the structural factors that influence life trajectories. (Axte et al., 2022; Hendrick and Marteleto, 2017; LaRue et al., 2021; Mausch et al., 2021). The inclusion of agency as the capacity of individuals to have the power and resources to fulfill their potential, supports the exploration of a further category of research: the degree to which a participant experiences him/herself/themselves as free to act in the possible self-concerned or as an agent restricted by outside forces (Erikson, 2007). It also helps to challenge the narrative of rural, racialized or ethnic youth as "broken, hopeless, or inherently deficient" (Savage et al., 2021, p. 2) because it acknowledges the possibility of internal transformation. Not understanding and acknowledging the agency component prevents to understand and acknowledge how collective and individual agency interacts with broader social, economic, and cultural structures in shaping rural youth's aspirations and their life trajectories (Amador-Baquiro, 2016; Ospina-Ramírez and Ospina-Alvarado, 2017; White, 2021).

The article is structured as follows: the next section introduces key concepts related to aspirations and life courses, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework underpinning our study and an overview of the village's contextual background. We then outline the photovoice methodology and describe our analytical approach. Finally, we present the study's findings, followed by a discussion, conclusions, and recommendations.

1.1. Defining aspiration and life-course

We understand **aspiration** as an orientation toward a desired future (Huijsmans et al., 2021). Aspirations are born and nurtured in the social, historical, cultural, and economic contexts, where individuals are

(Amador-Baquiro, 2016; Amon-Armah et al., 2023; Clendenning, 2023; Filmer and Fox, 2014; Fox et al., 2016; Huijsmans et al., 2021b; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Jurado and Tobasura, 2012; Mausch et al., 2021; Piotrowski and Paat, 2012; Srinivasan, 2014; Thornton et al., 2014; Wang, 2022). Aspirations are dynamic; they change over time, and are influenced by individual characteristics that shape youth positionality (e.g., age, gender, sex, ethnicity, race, level of education, marriage status, location (rural/urban) interwoven with context dimensions (e.g., social, economic, cultural) (Clendenning, 2023; Dunne et al., 2021; Emirie et al., 2021; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Okali and Sumberg, 2012; Piotrowski and Paat, 2012).

Assaad and Krafft (2021) define **life-course** as "the interlinked sequence of age-specific social roles that individuals experience as their phases in life" (Assaad and Krafft, 2021, p. 188). Life-trajectory, life-pathway, and life-course are interchangeably used in the literature. In the life course field, transitions are embedded within trajectories (Elder and Giele, 2009), and each trajectory is the outcome of different dimensions (e.g., economic, social, individual) intersecting in specific moments of life (Elder and Giele, 2009).

1.2. Conceptual framework

The Possible Selves theory is a framework that helps explore individuals' positive or negative images of the self in a future state (Oyserman et al., 2006). This theoretical body was proposed in the psychology field in 1986 by Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius. The theory posits that the present self is the outcome of a complex, time-evolving process, in which individual agency is continually shaped—not solely determined—by lived experiences and the immediate context (including social, economic, and historical conditions, as well as family, community, and interpersonal dynamics) (Bohn and Berntsen, 2013; Delahunty and O'Shea, 2021; Hards et al., 2024; Harrison and Waller, 2018; Markus and Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2006; Rathbone et al., 2016). The immediate context, in turn, is influenced by the distant context, which encompasses broader environmental factors (such as natural resources), the economic system, socio-cultural norms, and political institutions that establish national and international frameworks (Jurado and Tobasura, 2012; Quiroga, 2021; Shepard, 2002, 2005). This distant context includes Neoliberalism as a system of power, its praxis, and its effects on youth lives, even though, these influences are often intangible and distant for youth (Appadurai, 2004; Arthur-Holmes and Yeboah, 2025; Silvers, 2023). Furthermore, agency has a dynamic relationship with the immediate and distant context, in which each of these elements can either enable or hinder individual and collective actions. In other words, each level of the context has the potential to influence or resist the influence of other dimensions (Arthur-Holmes and Yeboah, 2025; Azaola, 2012).

Moreover, "Possible Selves hence give a direct link between motivation and our social and cultural understanding of the world around us" (Erikson, 2007, p. 348). Therefore, Possible Selves diverge across social groups and geographies (Delahunty and O'Shea, 2021; Hankivsky et al., 2014a; Harrison and Waller, 2018; Osorio-Pérez, 2016). People will imagine diverse selves based on what is possible and probable within their context, and this construction creates and upholds a tension between the 'self' that is socially determined or constrained, and the relationship of individuals' past, present, and future (Appadurai, 2004; Delahunty and O'Shea, 2021; Harrison and Waller, 2018).

In addition, youth is not a homogenous group (Huijsmans et al., 2021). When talking about youth, we talk about intersecting identities such as sex, age, economic, and social characteristics (Huijsmans et al., 2021); therefore, the intersectionality lenses is crucial. Intersectionality is a prism and a framework to analyze power dynamics considering more than a single identity (e.g., age, marital status, gender, sex, race) of an individual, the experience of living the combination of these characteristics (Crenshaw, 1989; Hankivsky et al., 2014). Intersectionality places greater emphasis on the interwoven relation between the

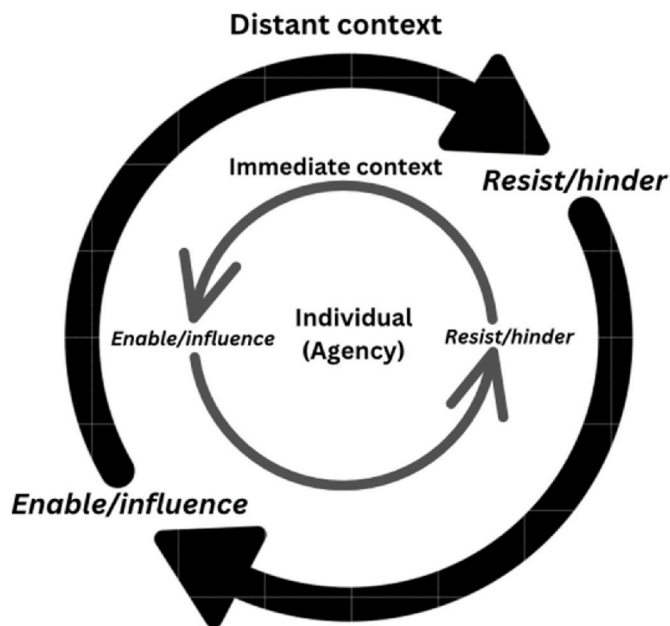


Fig. 1. Relationship between the distant and immediate contexts, and individual agency.

Note. Authors elaboration.

individuals' characteristics and the social and economic dimensions to identify who, where, and why some groups of people are marginalized, particularly women and girls in rural areas (Mandrona and Mitchell, 2018; Rentschler and Mitchell, 2016; Wyatt et al., 2022).

From a life-course perspective, it is essential to recognize that the social characteristics shaping individuals' experiences change over time; "Lives change as relationships and social roles change" (Elder and Giele, 2009, p. 9). Role transitions are an important part of development and social identity (Holman and Walker, 2021; Vespa, 2009). They also entail moving through different structural positions in the social hierarchy, with differential power dynamics and resources (Holman and Walker, 2021). Therefore, in many cultures as children transition to adolescents, and then to elder people, power shifts during their life course, because their role and resources change (Holman and Walker, 2021). Also, social norms might determine when and what aspiration an individual should have (Amon-Armah et al., 2023; Axze et al., 2022; Elder and Giele, 2009).

This research study incorporates the concept of agency to recognize individuals' capacity to act within specific historical, social, and economic contexts (Gómez-Urbe, 2024; Joron, 2015; Sarapura, 2008; Systems Innovation Network, 2024). Mitchell et al. (2022) describe that "The notion of youth agency implies that they have not only the ability but also the opportunity to set goals and objectives, but this is constrained by the social, political, and economic conditions that youth face" (Mitchell et al., 2022, p. 4). However, studies on rural youth remain scarce in academia (Osorio-Pérez, 2016), and the concept of youth agency, particularly rural youth agency, is often framed from an adult perspective or dominated by research rooted in the Global North (Mitchell et al., 2022; Osorio-Pérez, 2016; Punch, 2016). This reality underscores the importance of understanding what agency means from the perspective of rural youth in contested environments.

Ketonen-Oksi and Vigren (2024) conducted a systematic literature review to identify methods to imagine transformation. The study found that education, learning processes (e.g., improvisation exercises or building prototypes), collaborative work, strengthening capacities, and skills such as critical thinking are part of the pool of options to exercise agency (Appadurai, 2004; Ketonen-Oksi and Vigren, 2024). Focused on youth, meaningful participation is also part of the mechanisms that

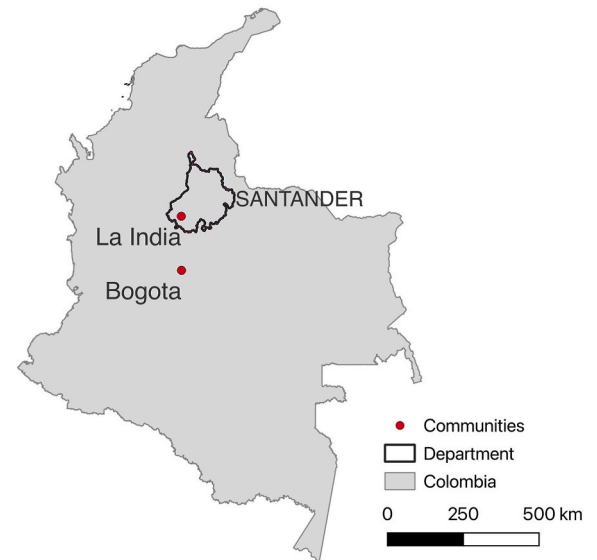


Fig. 2. Location of La India

Note. Authors elaboration.

enable individuals to exercise their agency (Trivelli and Morel, 2021).

Fig. 1 is a representation of the conceptual framework of rural youth life-course and aspirations. The figure describes the interaction of three levels –Distant, Immediate and Individual–in the creation and nurture of aspirations and life-courses. The levels connect to influence/enabling and resistant/hinder relationships. However, there are certain factors that could resist their influence. For example, the social, economic, and historical context can have a considerable impact on rural youth's Possible Selves, yet their agency could be an element that resists any pre-defined potential aspiration or life-course. The graphic also depicts how social characteristics and their experience, from an intersectionality framework, shapes the aspirations rural youth could potentially have.

1.3. Research location: La India (Santander, Colombia)

The research was conducted in a small village called La India in Santander department in Colombia. To refine the search of a study site the researchers followed a criterion. The criteria to select the place was guided by four conditions that come from gaps identified in the literature:

1. The region selected should be a place where there is ongoing conflict and there are licit and illicit¹ economies in place.
2. There is a willing partner to participate in the community.
3. The youth's population is diverse and influenced by both licit and illicit economies.
4. The security conditions do not threaten the research team and the participants.

The territory and region that La India is part of maintains a dual economy—licit agriculture and illicit activities. It reflects the socio-economic complexity of rural Colombia, which is exacerbated by limited state services and ongoing armed conflict. La India's historical ties to violence and peacebuilding constitute a critical and important

¹ "Illicitness not as an innate quality of certain goods, activities, or rural economies, but rather a socially

constructed condition that is produced by governments" (Sauls et al., 2022, p. 3). In Latin America it refers to the cultivation of coca and poppy. The concept is influenced by the War on Drugs narrative.

case study to dig deeper in these issues, while the community's willingness to participate and ensure safety made the research feasible. In addition, the school voluntarily accepted to participate in the research, become the key local partner and ensure security conditions for the team to conduct the study.

La India is an agricultural and livestock village located in Santander to the North-East of Colombia as Fig. 2 shows. At least 25 different agriculture products, including tangerines, plantains, papayas, soursops, and pineapples are produced (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2021). Animal agriculture in the village primarily includes chickens, pigs, and cattle. While there are not updated statistics available on agricultural activities in La India, we considered data about Landazuri-the municipality where La India is located-as a whole to get an idea of what the significance of the agricultural economy may be. Therefore, Landazuri's agricultural sector represents 0.3 % of the agricultural economy in the department of Santander (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2021).

La India has historically been a peripheral region, where the population lives on the brief economic boom of natural resources, some of which are illicit such as coca crops, illegal logging and mining (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2011). Many rural territories similar to La India live in an in-between licit and illicit economies where legal and illegal actors rule at the same time (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022; Dávalos, 2016; Dávalos et al., 2011; Escandón-Barbosa et al., 2019; Gómez-Urbe, 2024; Jacobo and Grajales, 2009). The national or central government has insufficient resources to offer even minimum social services (e.g., education, healthcare, sanitation) to the rural population. Therefore, illegal actors have historically performed and acted on the role of the government providing services such as education, roads, and security (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022; Grajales, 2021; Molano-Rojas and Moncada, 2017; OECD, 2014). For rural communities licit and illicit economies boundaries are blurred, and in many regions, both are essential for households' income. However, in some regions, farmers are forced by armed groups to participate in illegal activities (Acero and Thomson, 2021; Garzón, Gélvez, and UNODC, 2018; Penagos et al., 2020; Rincón-Ruiz et al., 2016).

Moreover, the region where La India is located has been involved and affected by the armed conflict that has been on-going in Colombia since 1950. Historically, many armed groups have been operating in the territory to control natural resources and use the river as an alternative means for illegal transportation of products (i.e., drugs, people, guns). La India's land holds the Carare River and its livelihoods, history and flow of resources are tied to it (Aguilera-Pena & Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, 2011; Comisión de la Verdad, 2022; Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2011). Although the community achieved a successful peace process in the periods of 1980–1990 and received the Alternative Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2011), between 1992 and 1999, several local leaders were murdered, and new armed actors established their power and control over the community (Aguilera-Pena & Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, 2011). Today, there are former guerilla members and criminal bands (BACRIM in Spanish) established in the community. Some of them run illicit and illegal businesses and they are known as “bosses”.

2. Methodology

We conducted a photovoice project following a Participatory Action Research approach (PAR) (Freire, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2018; Nurick and Apgar, 2014; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017; Shier, 2001; Wang and Burris, 1997). PAR is an epistemological orientation that

acknowledges and values the importance of subjective experience in knowledge construction (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015; Shamrova and Cummings, 2017). The goal of PAR is to co-create knowledge and facilitate social change. Social change is understood as a systemic change in which relationships and structures are fundamentally altered to enable traditionally marginalized groups to reclaim and assume their power (Cornish et al., 2023; Kantor and Apgar, 2013; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). Our methodology is participatory because it positions the focus of data production in a collaborative interplay between the researcher and the participants and it recognizes and enables different ways and forms of knowledge, including the local knowledge of the people who are at the center of the research (Arias and Gutiérrez, 2025; Bowd et al., 2010; Gómez-Urbe, 2024).

Photovoice was purposely selected as the main tool for the research study because it creates and discusses photographs as a means to catalyze personal and community change (Nielsen, 2021; Rasmussen, 2004a; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Side, 2005, 2021; Wang and Burris, 1997). Photovoice has also been successfully used in research projects that collaborate with youth (Carter, 2023; Jarldorn, 2019; Leaf Rapids Community Adjustment Committee et al., 2005; Rasmussen, 2004b; Rasmussen and Smidt, 2003; Side, 2021).

This research study encountered another layer of complexity. The call ‘bosses’ had to give permission, and we had to demonstrate commitment to build a trusting relationship with the students and the community before conducting any research activity. For the first challenge, the school's principal, some teachers and parents talked with some of the armed members to allow the research to happen in the village. The bosses gave their permission, yet they kept a close eye on the research activities by asking students multiple times about the topics discussed in the workshops. For the second challenge, for three months one of the members of the research team stayed in the village between four to five days to participate in school activities and just engage with the community dynamics. Teachers, mothers, and students would invite the researcher to participate in soccer games, play bingo, talk, participate in community meetings, and socialize over beverages after a long day. All these actions helped the research team to be known and trusted by the community.

2.1. Ethics and limitations

Due to the context and target population, the study received Research Ethics Board (REB) approval from the University of Guelph in April 2023. To safeguard participant privacy and anonymity, and maintain ethical integrity, informed consent (both written and verbal) was obtained from all participants or their legal guardians to participate in the study. A consent form was prepared and read out to potential study participants, who were then allowed to express their willingness to participate. To protect the participant's identity all the names used in the paper have been changed.

Participants were recruited through the school for four main reasons: the target population consisted of school-age adolescents (Barlett and Vavrus, 2017); school-based research facilitates access to a diverse group of participants (Markus and Nurius, 1986); formal involvement of the school helps to ease suspicions among families and increase participation, particularly in rural areas (Mishna et al., 2012) and school-based initiatives are especially valuable for youth with limited access to services, including those marginalized by race, ethnicity, religion, sex, or sexual orientation (Barlett and Vavrus, 2017). This approach, however, excluded young people not currently enrolled in school, which is a limitation on the universe of the study.

Table 1
Profile of photovoice participants.

Men	Women	Age	Grade
11	25	19: 2 participants 18: 6 participants 17: 8 participants 16: 8 participants 15: 9 participants 14: 3 participants	Nine: 8 Ten: 8 Eleven: 20

Note. Of 40 enrolled students, 36 participated in the activities. Of the four that did not start the workshop, two moved away from La India before the workshops started and the other two decided not to participate in the research because of personal reasons.

2.2. The photovoice project

The study involved four photovoice groups and a total of 36 youth (see Table 1). Each group included nine to 11 participants. As the main inclusion criteria, participants had to be between 14 and 19 years -old and study at the local school. The groups were divided by grade considering the recommendations from the school. All students 16 years old and above signed a consent form, and for younger students, parents or guardians had to sign a consent form.²

The photovoice initiative included eight workshops of 2 h and delivered after classes. The term workshop is used to indicate a space where different activities were implemented by putting together different methods (Gómez-Urbe, 2024). Based on the research goals, the study addressed four topics that worked as ‘umbrella’ themes: territory, the people who live in the territory, what people do in the territory (professions/jobs), and opportunity described as what resources (financial, social, cultural) youth find in their community to nurture their life-course and aspirations. These themes came from an academic and community literature review; they emerged as the themes that influence the most rural youth aspirations (Amon-Armah et al., 2023; Fox & International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2019; Glover and Sumberg, 2020; Hassen et al., 2025; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Jurado and Tobasura, 2012; LaRue et al., 2021; Mausch et al., 2021; Nasielski et al., 2023; Okali and Sumberg, 2012; Osei and Yeboah, 2023; A. Penagos et al., 2020; Srinivasan, 2014; Srinivasan and White, 2023; Sumberg et al., 2021; Tobón et al., 2019; Viviane Filippi et al., 2023; White, 2021; Zipin et al., 2015).

To explore rural youth’ voices and ideas each workshop comprised four elements:

- 1. **Training** students received training in photography (i.e., how to use the camera, composition, light). We prepared a manual for them to follow that includes topics such as risk prevention, mitigation and best practices to use the camera. The training included the use of images as representation of concepts and data in research.
- 2. **Activities to trigger conversations and reflection:** in each group we conducted community mapping exercises to identify where rural youth see themselves in the community, and puppets to represent the different professions in the community.

² Youth Consent (people between 16 years old and 17 years old): The informed consent will follow the Article 3.1 – Chapter 3: The consent Process by the Panel on Research Ethics. Considering the TCPS 2 interpretations regarding consent, age and the study, the research will ask consent directly from the students. The reasons to support this approach are i) the study wants to include and uplift youth’s voices. Having to ask consent from parents and/or guardians might mediate youth’s participation and hinder their opportunity to express freely, and ii) it shows respect for youths’ abilities and maturity and is in keeping with what Williams (2006) refers to as an emerging consensus, ‘ ... about the need to let young people speak for themselves, subject to appropriate safeguards’ (Mitchell, 2013; Williams, 2006).

Table 2
Students’ identified themes.

Theme	Student’s interpretations
Youth	This group of photos show young men and children in the village. Most of the photos show them working in the port or doing a labour activity.
Ecosystem	The photos in this group represent the natural resources (i.e., the river, the forest, the flowers, and the animals) in the village. They also represent the beauty of their territory.
Entrepreneurship	Students gathered under this theme the activities young people must do to generate income to live and support their nuclear and extended families. Boys and men are in the photos, while girls and women are not.
Agricultural and livestock production	This group of photos focuses on the main licit economic activities people in the village do to generate income.
Effort and joy	This group of photos depicts the conundrum youth and children face in the village. Students describe that it is a struggle to live in La India due to the work and socio-economic conditions of their families; and it is a joy to be there and enjoy their families and their territory (i.e., clean air, water). Boys and men are in the photos.

- 3. **Hikes, photography and reflection:** each week we hiked around the village to take pictures that represented one of the ‘umbrella’ topics for the week. After each hike, we had a debrief time where students talk about their photos. Their ideas, comments and explanations for the photos were captured through voice recorders and journal notes, when students didn’t want to be recorded. All the notes were analyze following a thematic analysis using Nvivo.
- 4. **Bonding activities:** every session had one or two exercises for building trust and having fun. Students played games (i.e., soccer), charades, or were involved in short meditations to set up the mood for the workshops.

When the workshops ended, students wanted to create a photo showcase of their work. Each student chose a photo and the name they wanted to be displayed in the exhibition. It’s important to say that each student took between 150 photos to 380 photos during the workshops, therefore, each student chose one photo for the display. The research team helped them to print the photos, and displayed it in three additional rural schools, the central park in Cimitarra, Cimitarra public library, La India school, and the principal park in the village. Author’s names were displayed as each of the participants wanted to display their work. The research team believe this was an alternative to let them express and embrace their art.

2.3. Data analysis

One of the goals of the study was to uplift rural youth’s voices and include them in both data collection and aspects of data analysis. In this study, the youth were the primary participants. Their main contributions were the generation of data through photographs and their involvement in a collaborative thematic analysis. To support this process, we printed the selected photos for the exhibition and asked the students to group them under an umbrella or major themes, followed by descriptions of each theme. Table 2 presents the themes identified by the students as critical for their aspirations and life courses.

The primary data consist of the 36 photos chosen for the exhibition, complemented by students’ thematic categorizations, their explanations, and the debrief conversations during the photovoice workshops and focus groups. While youth contributions shaped the thematic framing, we facilitated the process, triangulated across the different methods implemented in the workshops, and carried out the formal analysis and interpretation of the data.

3. Results

“This is incredible! People can have animals again and I see the trees. Oh! It’s been a long time. I miss the mango tree my dad had. They were so sweet”, said Profe³ Clara while looking at some of the photos of La India students during the photovoice project. Profe Clara works in Cimitarra. She had to abandon La India in the 90s’ when the guerrilla took the village and killed all her dad’s animals and burned the crops. She remembers when the guerrilla took her brother. She never saw him again, and she still wonders if he is still alive.

Youth: this theme has photos where youth or children are part of the photo, elements that represent youth activities or spaces where they see themselves like the soccer field. Students included in this category the status of youth infrastructure (i.e., playgrounds) in a poor condition. Luis in Fig. 3 displays a soccer shoe in poor conditions. He said he chose the photo to depict the field courses and park conditions in the community. Fig. 4 shows a group of students from La India High School walking after school. This is the only photo taken by the participants that include girls in it.

Figs 5 and 6 depict young men working in the port. Most of them are lifting heavy wood blocks without protection. Six male photovoice participants worked in the port lifting wood blocks when we conducted the research; both expressed that they had to do it to pay rent and food or support their parents. They and other students took the photos to capture what they did. This approach is frequent in photovoice projects; Kosterina (2018) reports that in a photovoice project conducted in Russia, children took many pictures to record places or subjects that related to themselves (Kosterina, 2018).

Other students took photos of animals to represent the relationship they have with them. Pedro in Fig. 7 shows his chickens because he has to take care of them, and he is proud of *“how fat and cute they are”*. Mariana on the other hand took a picture of her dog (Fig. 8). She chose it because she said, *“the dog looks high (laugh) and that’s normal here”*. She refers to the production, distribution and consumption of drugs (Cocaine and Marihuana) in the village.

3.1. The ecosystem

Students in the pictures show the natural elements of the contexts. Three quarters of the photos chosen are a representation of the village ecosystem. Figs. 9 and 10 are a sample of the group of photos of the theme. During the photovoice workshops and focus groups they used words like *“beautiful”*, *“incredible”* or *“pretty”* to describe the landscape. During the hikes students frequently talked about the biodiversity



Fig. 3. Representation of youth A.



Fig. 4. Representation of youth B.



Fig. 5. Representation of youth C.



Fig. 6. Representation of youth D.

richness they have in La India, but students described that the people don’t take care of it. A female student mentioned that people throw garbage in the river or the forest, other suggested that trees give a lot of money, but nobody is thinking about re planting or taking care of them.

³ Profe is a friendly way to call teachers in Colombia.



Fig. 7. Representation of youth E.



Fig. 8. Representation of youth F.



Fig. 9. Representation of the ecosystem A.



Fig. 10. Representation of the ecosystem B.

In addition, the river was part of many of the photographs which highlights the importance of it for the community. The river represents a place to swim when the temperature increases, a place to play, and a transportation channel. Delahunty and Hellwig (2024) conducted a study to explore the influence of communities on rural young people's hoped-for futures in Australia. Participants had affective responses to describe the rural space they come from; "some endearing qualities included being more peaceful than cities, having wide open spaces and fresh air, being surrounded by natural beauty and the aesthetic quality of picturesque towns, as well as the feeling of emotional and physical security (feeling at "home", safe to walk around at night or leave doors unlocked)(Delahunty and Hellwig, 2024). The closeness of "everything" (Delahunty and Hellwig, 2024, p. 1449). Hofstede et al., 2022 describe that for young adults in rural areas, the environmental characteristics of these places are highly appreciated and important for expectations to stay (Hofstede et al., 2022). Osorio-Pérez (2016) describes how the landscape is critical to understand rural youth, because rurality encompass several memories and feelings, from happiness to joy (Osorio-Pérez, 2016); it is a mixed of emotions and ideas for rural youth, it could from a burden to a rural idyll (Azaola, 2012).

3.2. Entrepreneurship

This theme caused a lot of discussion between the participants. For some of them the theme was 'job', for others 'opportunity' or 'activities to make money' and for some others the photos in this category were just part of money or ecosystem. However, after going back and forth, they chose to name this theme entrepreneurship because they wanted to be perceived as resilient and survivors. They acknowledge their families are poor, however, they can find alternative ways to make some money and support themselves or their families. Therefore, they chose this word.

José and Cristina chose photos with a rooster and a pig. José (Fig. 11) raise roosters and sell them for fights. With the money he makes, he helps his mom who cleans the school every afternoon. Cristina (Fig. 12) chose the pig because she takes care of them and when her dad sells the animal the money is used to pay her education. Emilia chose the photo (Fig. 13) of a young boy with a calf to evidence that many young boys in the village work in farms to generate some income.

3.3. Agriculture and livestock

For students it was important to depict the two most important economic activities of the village and where most of their parents' work: agriculture and livestock. Some of the participants work with their parents in the farms or they work in other farms. Also, the school has a



Fig. 11. Representation of the entrepreneurship theme A.



Fig. 12. Representation of the entrepreneurship theme B.



Fig. 13. Representation of the entrepreneurship theme C.

farm and from grade eight they must learn how to take care of it. The food production is sold outside the village. For Manuel (Fig. 14) cows are the most important because thanks to them his grandparents can take care of him and his siblings; in her photo, Maria (Fig. 15) wanted to show how their family sent farm produce to market in little boats.



Fig. 14. Representation of Agriculture and Livestock theme A.



Fig. 15. Representation of Agriculture and Livestock B.

3.4. Effort and joy

This theme represents the dichotomy students have in their lives. They are happy in the village because they have their families and the natural resources, but they acknowledge that their socio-economic status and the lack of other resources make them to wish to leave La India. “Opportunity? What do you mean, teacher? There are no opportunities here unless you are Rodríguez⁴ and have all the money to do what you want”, said one male students in one of the photovoice workshops. Another female student said, “You want us to do what? There are no opportunities in this place. I can’t think of a single thing that represents opportunity in La India”. When exploring the concept of opportunity, students expressed that it was hard to imagine or think about something that represents it. When we tried to explore why it was difficult, they mentioned that people are “successful” or “happy” when they have money.

When describing Fig. 16, Karen said she “couldn’t imagine having a life in a place like this. I wish I could stay because my grandmother and my mom needed me, but when I finish high school, I want to leave La India”. On the other hand, Camila (Fig. 17) chose the picture of the river and boats to represent her childhood memories: “The best memories I have are in La

⁴ Name changed for security reasons.



Fig. 16. Representation of the effort and joy theme A.



Fig. 17. Representation of the effort and joy theme B.

India. Swimming with my family in the river, having family parties”.

4. Discussion

Based on our results we argue that rural territories like La India do not foster an enabling environment for youth to envision alternative life-courses outside their village. On the contrary, the relationship between the distant, immediate contexts and the individual level reproduce and strengthen Possible Selves that marginalize rural youth and exploit their physical strength, reproductive capacity and ensure labour supply for licit and illicit local economies; in other words, the system establishes and strengthens unbalanced power relationships and undermines individual and collective agency (Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda, 2020; Bridi, 2022; Jiménez-Guevara, 2019; Ojeda, 2021; Pérez-Espitia, 2018; Singh et al., 2023; White, 2021). From our results, the distant and immediate contexts have a critical role in determining the aspirations of youth, and their future life-courses (Amador-Baquiro, 2016; Arthur-Holmes and Yeboah, 2025; Azaola, 2012; Elias et al., 2018; Hassen et al., 2025; Valencia-Suescún et al., 2015).

In La India Possible Selves are born within the Neoliberal model, and they will follow a profit and market-driven approach (Rankin and Shakya, 2008). During the discussions participants highlighted the money as an enabling condition to leave the village and make their dreams come true. The observation made by the students is not surprising considering the context where they live and the social and economic conditions; Mitchell et al. (2022) conducted a photovoice project in Mali in areas where the conflict has affected rural education. The goals were to discuss youth agency in situations of crisis and how participatory

visual methods can be used both as a way of ascertaining adolescents' perception of their agency and also to contribute to the development of youth agency (Mitchell et al., 2022). The photos and participants testimonies describe how sewing or having chickens helps them to make some income; for them money represented a prerequisite for agency (Mitchell et al., 2022). In La India the natural resources, particular animals were a mean to have money for students and then have access to materials things they don't have like motorcycles or supporting their families as Figs. 11–13 and 15 show. However, and as Mitchell et al. (2022) questioned in their work as well, is this idea of money in the students a representation of grassroots Neoliberalism? As Rankin and Shakya (2008) describe the believe of money as enabling condition to change one's life has deterred communities to engage in capacity development activities, which at the end has negative effect on the agency (Mitchell et al., 2022; Rankin and Shakya, 2008).

Illegal and legal actors have set the rules to appropriate the modes of production in the village (i.e., natural resources, labour, infrastructure); few people (mainly armed actors) access, control, and benefit from the modes of production, which as a consequence reproduce the poverty cycle in the village. This cycle is exacerbated by the lack of State presence (i.e., health, education, administrative services and representatives). Figs. 3 and 16 show the circumstances of some places near where kids play; Some are full of garbage and in poor conditions. Some residents of La India say that the village receives less resources and public investment than other nearby communities, and the mayor does not fully exercise his role as an authority; he visits the village twice per year and government authorities (e.g., police, municipal secretaries, child services) are rarely present in the municipality. Informants for this research reported several situations where they needed support from authorities from Landázuri (e.g., criminal activity, domestic violence) and that the authorities were not present to provide that support. As a result, the community of La India asked for help and support from the Cimitarra authorities, but their request was denied because La India is not part of the municipality of Cimitarra.

There is a correlation between illegal economies, violence and school drop-out and child labour (Rodríguez and Sánchez, 2012). Many young people prefer working in the village's port (figure five and six) or in low-paid jobs in the illegal value chains; it is common for young people to take days off from school to work. This is more frequent when young people live alone. Participants who live by themselves described time constraints to make some money for buying food, paying rent and studying at the same time. Similarly, some young women work as cooks and sexual workers in logging enterprises. For most of the girls perform at home and with the family, their parents or caregivers wouldn't pay for the work because it is perceived as a youth's responsibility. As other scholars have evidenced child labour is motivated by economic factors and social norms (Abdullah et al., 2022; Bandara et al., 2015). According to Rodríguez and Sánchez (2012, p. 162), “the conflict in Colombia has reduced the average education of students residing in conflict areas by almost half a year of education”.

In contexts where licit and illicit economies coexist with limited opportunities, young people engage in risky economic activities with higher expectations on the income they can make (Glover and Sumberg, 2020; Yáñez et al., 2021). Yáñez et al. (2021) conducted 38 semi-structures interviews with rural young men and women engaged in coca and poppy crops in Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru. They found that rural youth participate in illicit and illegal economies as a mechanism to reclaim spaces and control of resources where they feel adults have excluded them (Yáñez et al., 2021). For example, having access to land, social admiration, assets (Yáñez et al., 2021). Moreover, Glover and Sumberg (2020) state that “in certain circumstances, because of poverty and a lack of realistic alternatives, young people may accept work in unsafe, stressful and physically rigorous conditions” (Glover and Sumberg, 2020, p. 7). Groups involved in coca and drug trade could impose a certain ‘order’ influencing individuals' behavior (García et al., 2023).

The fact that there is one photo that include girls (Fig. 4) reaffirms what other scholars have suggested: rural women and girls are invisible; they are a blind spot in rural studies (Mandrona and Mitchell, 2018; Yáñez et al., 2021) and their activities are less valued to those of men (Dahlström, 1996.). Girls and young women live in a place where male culture is embedded in social norms, these roles are treated as usual, normal and every generation reproduce them (Dahlström, 1996; Glover and Sumberg, 2020; Srinivasan, 2014; Sumberg et al., 2021a,b). This notion influences how women and girls see themselves (Shepard, 2002, 2004). It might explain that only one of the exhibition photos (figure five) includes girls in the photovoice project, yet you can only see their backs. Srinivasan (2014) describes that youth as well as adults are embedded in the micro-contexts of everyday lives in which gendered practices are reproduced (Srinivasan, 2014).

4.1. Education and marginalization

The local school focuses on natural sciences (i.e., biology, agriculture, chemistry) education, and agriculture and livestock training. The training is delivered by Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA). SENA is a public institution that provides free training through technical, technological, and supplementary programs. This is the only formal course students can access when they attend grades ten and eleven. Teachers and community members interviewed mentioned that these courses at least are something valuable students may have; *“it can open some doors for them in the future”* said one adult interviewee. However, these courses strengthen the belief that rural youth must be tied to the agricultural field and does not provide opportunities for young men and women to strengthen other skills and capacities for other professions.

The school has insufficient financial and human resources to include alternative educational programs. At least 12 participants of the photovoice groups mentioned that they feel there are no opportunities to work in the future outside agriculture. *“It is like they want us to stay here (La India)”* one female participant said and added, *“there is no support to study engineer, law, medicine (...) it is plantain, papayas, cows, trees or coca (laughs)”*.

In addition, if a student wants to pursue a degree in post-secondary education, they encounter many obstacles. As Arias and Gutiérrez (2025) found in a life courses study in rural Colombia, rural youth has limited access to information and guidance on higher education pathways, coupled with a lack of structured vocational counseling, which hinders their ability to navigate universities' admission process (Arias and Gutiérrez, 2025). In addition, most of them lack funding to pay the university fees, shelter, food and other related expenses. Also, the closest university is in Barrancabermeja (Santander), approximately 3 h from La India. If the students make it to the university, they face a knowledge gap due to the limited preparation in La India that usually forces them to quit their studies.

Walker and Mkwanzani (2015) describe that *“the absence of such support and opportunities results in the youth, to have less power and freedom and make informed choices to take the necessary action to bring about the change they value”* (Walker and Mkwanzani, 2015, p. 44). Transformative and sustainable change is fostered through processes of critical reflection and action, often triggered by exposure to different knowledge, experiences and through debate, where formal and informal education has a critical role (Cole et al., 2014; Kantor and Apgar, 2013). Therefore, in La India, education limits the exposure students have to other disciplines and impact their capacity to imagine alternative futures (Ketonen-Oksi and Vigren, 2024).

Moreover, students do not have safe spaces within their school or community to exercise their agency. Youth is perceived by many adults in the community as cheap labour and individuals who must obey what adults say. Many times, participants expressed they did not have a chance to participate in the decision-making process of their communities. They are never consulted about the decisions that affect them, and no information, access to training or mentoring opportunities exist

for them to strengthen their self-confidence.

Older students in photovoice group one and two discussed the silence culture they have in the village. Students described the silence culture as an active set of actions community use to avoid being targeted by the illegal groups or to prevent people to create conflicts among neighbors. *“If something happens and we know is not right, we just let it happen. There is no reason to say something”*, said one female participant, and another female student added *“teachers keep telling me that I would be a great lawyer. But I don't want to be a lawyer. So, I just let them say whatever and I keep silence. I don't need to explain myself to them”*.

Western academia has advocated for a conceptualization of agency as a resistance to power imbalances and oppression (Mahmood, 2001; Mitchell et al., 2022), yet, considering the relationship between the contexts and the social norms, sometimes agency means to act within a specific environment. A *“docile agency is not the same as passivity; it may carry a sense of effort, struggle, and achievement. Docility may also be strategic in that it may also effect change and transform perceptions and attitudes. And rather being considered as subject this process is the outcome of the relationship between agency and structures”* (Mitchell et al., 2022, p. 06). In La India, youth develop, nurture and transform their aspirations and life-courses based on the conditions of their place.

While the permission granted by local *“bosses”* was necessary for the project to proceed, we recognize that their oversight may have influenced the dynamics of youth participation. Students reported that the bosses occasionally inquired about workshop topics, activities and questions about the purpose of the photos; this could have created a sense of surveillance. However, the silence expressed by some participants aligns with what they themselves described as a broader culture of silence in La India; silence is used as a survival strategy to navigate conflict, avoid retaliation, and maintain community harmony. Rather than interpreting silence solely as a sign of constraint, we understand it as a complex form of agency, as Mahmood (2001) describes, exercised strategically within a contested context. Thus, while external oversight may have contributed to the reticence of some participants, it must be situated within the wider structural and cultural dynamics that shape how rural youth engage, resist, and express themselves.

Therefore, what does transformative mean in contexts like La India? Mitchell (2022) had a similar discussion about what does transformative mean in a context where conflict is part of youth's every day; *“it led us to reflect on who decides what is transformative and what is not and whether it is ethical to expect transformative agency in a context of crisis”* (Mitchell et al., 2022, p. 11). We cannot understand rural youth agency without exploring the context where rural youth live. To improve students' capacity to pursue alternative life-courses, its necessary to also invigorate and enhance the local context (White, 2021).

Based on the research in La India, ensuring a nurturing environment for rural youth is where academia and development practitioners should put the efforts and goals (Glover and Sumberg, 2020; White, 2021). We, as a society, keep asking rural young men and women that while dream big, also farm or work as labour in rural places (Appadurai, 2004; Glover and Sumberg, 2020; White, 2021), however, the capacity to aspire is not evenly distributed in a world where Neoliberal institutions favor a small group of the population (Appadurai, 2004; Silvers, 2023). As noted by Appadurai (2004), *“this resource, unequally tilted in favor of the wealthier people, is also subject to the truism that “richer get richer” [...] I am not saying that poor cannot wish, want, need, plan or aspire. But part of poverty is a diminishing of the circumstances in which these practices occur”* (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69).

The discussion of rural youth aspirations and life trajectories in La India highlights the intricate interplay between structural conditions, social norms, and agency. The findings suggest that the Neoliberal economic model and policies have profoundly shaped rural territories, embedding a logic that privileges profit over human development. The conceptualization of rurality reflects a space marked by economic exclusion, institutional neglect, and an unequal distribution of resources, reinforcing barriers for youth seeking alternative life paths

(Bedoya et al., 2019; García et al., 2023; Rodríguez and Sánchez, 2012; Sánchez et al., 2019).

5. Conclusion

Historically, academia has faced challenges in fully engaging and enabling the empowerment of rural youth in research. These challenges are often linked to factors such as limited funding, lack of specialized skills, and constraints of time and additional workload (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). Furthermore, the inclusion of rural youth in research has frequently been framed from an economic perspective or driven by a focus on rural and racialized characteristics, which tends to reinforce marginalized narratives (Jiménez-Guevara, 2019; Savage et al., 2021). Our study captured the factors that influence the development, evolution, and nurturing of aspirations and life courses from the eyes and experience of rural youth in a contested context.

To achieve this, we conducted a photovoice project rooted in Possible Selves and informed by intersectionality and agency. The combination of external (i.e., social, economic, historical contexts) and internal (i.e., agency) factors determine the aspirations and life-course of rural youth. We assume there is an enable/hinder relationship between the distant and immediate context, and the individual self that produces the aspirations in rural youth.

Our results demonstrate the combination of the practice of Neoliberal licit and illicit institutions and the ongoing conflict has a deep influence in rural youth aspirations. These factors shaped youth perception of their reality, the education and economic opportunities in the community, which in the end marginalize youth and undermine their agency, perceived level of available opportunities and the confidence to achieved them, and their participation in decision-making process that affect them. In consequence, rural youth aspirations clash with their context (Delahunty and O'Shea, 2021; Harrison and Waller, 2018; LaRue et al., 2021; Mausch et al., 2021).

The results indicate that economic and profit-driven factors play a significant role in influencing rural youth aspirations and life-courses. This dynamic reinforces the narrative that youth are only considered valuable insofar as they contribute to the economy. Furthermore, the ongoing conflict or war intensifies the power imbalances faced by rural youth under the Neoliberal model, making them more vulnerable to involvement in illicit economies. Considering our results, the foremost call to action is the urgent need to prevent conflict dynamics and the influence of illegal actors from further marginalizing rural youth. While this responsibility should be prioritized by local governments, international cooperation also has a role to play in supporting initiatives that move beyond agriculture as the dominant focus in rural development. Such initiatives should actively engage youth in envisioning and pursuing alternative life-courses that expand their opportunities and aspirations.

Finally, based on the photos and focus group discussions, we found it striking that girls and women were largely absent from the images. Similar findings have been reported in other studies in Colombia, which suggest the need to further explore the role of young rural women to better understand their positionality within rural communities, which is often shaped by dominant male cultures (RIMISP, 2020; Yáñez et al., 2021). In addition, as a case study some of the elements gathered here might not be replicable in other areas or contexts, however, they help to close the remaining gap regarding rural youth aspirations and participation in the Global South.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Margarita Fontecha: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation. **Silvia Sarapura-Escobar:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ryan Gibson:** Writing – review & editing,

Validation, Supervision, Data curation.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used ChatGPT in order to improve the readability and language of the manuscript. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Declaration of competing interest

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

Data availability

URL to data was included in the application.

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