



From 'prison' to 'paradise'? Seeking freedom at the rainforest frontier through urban–rural migration

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ABSTRACT

The lives of the urban poor in the majority world are unfree: blighted by social injustice in its manifold forms, from violence and ill-health to absent economic opportunities. We explore the pursuit of freedom through migration away from the metropole to *ramais* (colonisation tracks) at the rainforest frontier. Drawing on a case study in Brazilian Amazonia, we reveal urban–rural migration as a frontier dynamic driven by the search for a good life. We theorize freedom and the good life using the capabilities approach, starting from the observation that people in the *ramais* reported feeling better, and asking why that is. We find that frontiers provide a safer environment, which fosters individual and collective capabilities. A lower risk of violence reduces fears around bodily integrity, pervasive in Latin American cities. This safety fosters freedom and dignity by reducing worries and anxieties, leading to improvements in emotional well-being. We understand this increased sense of freedom as enhanced agency, that is, empowerment. In addition to new forms of political activity and subjectivity, we report a flourishing of senses, imagination and affiliation with others. Inequalities are reduced, positively influencing dignity and self-worth. These new freedoms are threatened by lack of rights provisioning by the State, however. We recommend that the Brazilian state should address social and environmental dimensions of these new forest frontiers. The state should recognize and support these settlements as valid forms of development, because they so clearly contribute to human wellbeing and flourishing. The state should guide and assist livelihood and landscape management toward more ecological approaches such as agroecology and agroforestry, to mitigate deforestation risks typical of forest frontiers.

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1. Introduction

“It’s paradise here! All the qualities of life are here! I feel good and free, I walk around without any worry and I love looking after my animals and plants. In the beginning, when we moved here, we had all the difficulties in the world, but I am so glad that my health has improved so much since we moved. It was worth all the effort we put in. We have successfully overcome all of the obstacles we have faced since our arrival”.

This reflection from Lúcia¹ about her life on *Ramal Cachoeira*, the unpaved road central to her community, was shared by most of those we met during fieldwork in the municipality of Rio Preto da Eva (see Figs. 1–3). Lúcia is the leader of a colonist community at a forest frontier one hundred kilometres by road from Manaus, a metropolis in the central Brazilian Amazon. Following decades of

unplanned growth, the city now has over 2.2 million inhabitants, compared to fewer than 350,000 in 1960. Like Lúcia, most people living on these colonisation roads (*ramais*) have arrived relatively recently –between 2005 and 2015– after spending most of their lives in the city. Most were fleeing the low-income and violent neighbourhoods where they had lived in Manaus (see Piva da Silva, Fraser, & Parry, 2021).

Economic development models in Brazil have focussed on specific regions and cities, leaving out big portions of the country’s territory where many live almost without access to basic rights including education, health and job (and livelihood) opportunities. As a result, we find various forms of spontaneous migration in search of a better life – people have to make their own development (Caldeira, 2000; Dodd, 2020; Dufour & Piperata, 2004). Motivations behind urban–rural migration are shaped by the promise of rural peace, tranquillity and freedom on the one hand, and the everyday violence and paucity of opportunity in cities on the other. In Brazilian Amazonia, this has been demonstrated by Macdonald and Winklerprins (2014) who found that migration was more

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¹ We have de-identified all participants by using pseudonyms.

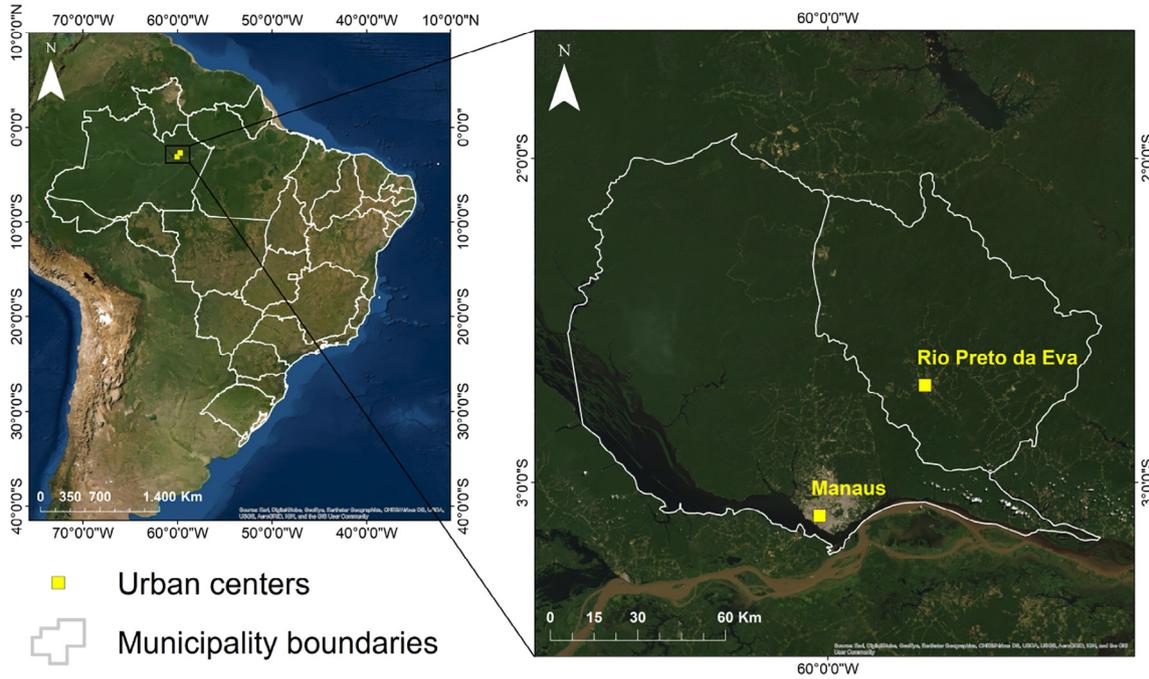


Figure 1. The locations of Manaus (the metropolis) and Rio Preto da Eva (the hinterland) within Brazil. Municipal boundaries (light lines) refer to the right-side map. On the left-side map, light lines indicate the boundaries of Brazilian states.

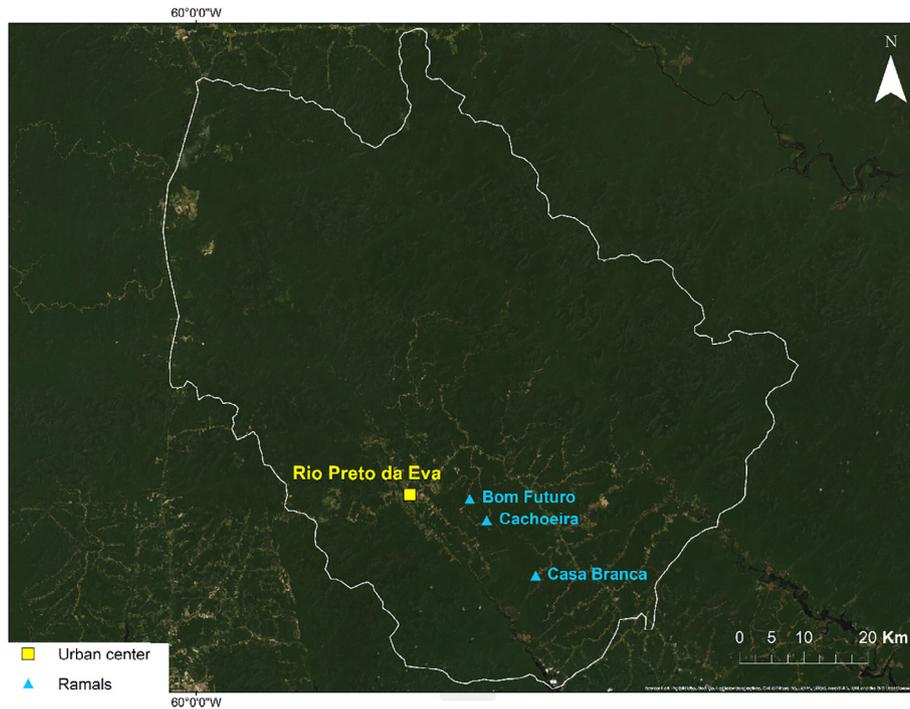


Figure 2. The three colonization tracks (*ramais*) Bom Futuro, Cachoeira and Casa Blanca where fieldwork was carried out, and the closest small town, Rio Preto da Eva.

related to the pursuit of improved wellbeing rather than to a lack of economic and social opportunities in the places left behind, among migrants from urban to *peri*-urban areas around Santarém. As their informants explained, “Here it is easy to save money, it is tranquil, and we have energy, water, security, education” (ibid:304). Their key finding is that migrants are drawn to a higher quality of life in more rural areas than in the city. This opens up the question of how to theorize ‘the good life’. The *peri*-urban areas close to Santarém described by Macdonald and Winklerprins were relatively well developed, providing migrants with “relatively good

infrastructure ... schools, abundant natural resources, formal and informal employment opportunities, as well as easy access to the city of Santarém with its larger range of goods, services, and jobs” (ibid:305). By contrast, the *ramais* we present here –20–30 km from the town of Rio Preto da Eva, itself 81 km from the city of Manaus— were completely undeveloped prior to settlement by people like Lúcia.

We examine the underexplored phenomenon of urban migration to forest frontiers, and draw on the capabilities approach in order to theorize the ‘good life’ which is, in the end, what people are seeking



Figure 3. A colonization track: Ramal da Cachoeira.

to achieve through this migration. The capabilities approach reveals the shortcomings of modernist accounts of what it is to be human — individualized utility maximization— refocusing on the much older and more profound philosophical question of ‘how to live a good life.’ What is missing from utilitarianism, according to Amartya Sen (1990), is a conceptualization of which activities we are able to partake in (‘doings’) and the kinds of people we are able to become (‘beings’). The capabilities approach has emerged as a hugely popular way to understand human freedom and development in a register that is universal, and therefore intelligible to government and international actors (Nussbaum, 2013; Sen, 1990).

We took an inductive approach, starting from the observation that people in the *ramais* reported feeling better, and ask why that is. To understand why Lúcia and other urban–rural migrants feel so positive about frontier life — even in the absence of paved roads, electricity, schools, medical provisioning and so forth — we must first understand their ideas of the ‘good life’ and how this relates to the urban lives left behind. As we will see, they often made these moves in the absence of economic incentives. Instead, their primary motive was to escape the violence of urban life and the ways in which it renders them unfree. *Ramais* are, according to them, much safer than the city streets due to a reduced risk of violence and this considerably reduces fears around bodily integrity (see Piva da Silva et al., 2021). Reduced anxiety appears to foster improved emotional well-being because people feel less worried, tense and stressed. Many of the colonists reported feeling freer than before, empowered by an increased capacity for agency and social affiliation. Moreover, as we go on to show, many also felt freer to realise forms of affect: sense, thoughts and imagination. Collective action is key. Rural life demands that people who were somewhat atomized in their former urban lives take up the kinds of collective action that are necessary both to establish and maintain rural livelihoods, and to press the government to recognise them, and subsequently, to actualize rights (e.g., to education, secure land tenure, healthcare, support for agriculture) at a forest frontier.

Achieving capabilities —beings and doings— is a move toward freedom, and away from ‘unfreedom’. We understand urban–rural

migration and the associated acts of claiming recognition and rights from the state as being driven by a seeking of freedom to achieve capabilities that are impossible in the city. Our definition of freedom encompasses the act of moving from urban to rural areas. Our focus is on the act of seeking freedom through migration, and subsequent rights and recognition claims on the state. We apply this approach by looking at the forms of freedom people pursue, along with the politics that people engage in through their struggles to achieve these freedoms. The requirements for establishing a new life in those rural areas have compelled people to act collectively in pursuing rights and improving their capabilities. We contend this approach gets us closer than utilitarianism does to understanding migration to frontiers. The novel contribution of our paper is to understand the perspectives and motivations of those making these moves in terms of a search for freedom (on the *ramais*) and escape from unfreedom (in the metropole).

Section two explains how we approached the study of urban–rural migration as a frontier dynamic, theoretically and methodologically. Section three examines how people’s lives have been improved through urban–rural migration, compared to how they were before, while section four examines emergent forms of social organisation as people try to make a living at the forest frontier, focusing in particular on land tenure and livelihoods. Section five presents our concluding discussion and policy recommendations.

2. Urban-rural migration: Conceptualizing and studying freedom and the frontier

We explore how urban–rural migrants — independently of government policy² — develop new lives and livelihoods that are freer,

² Most of the area of the communities we studied does not belong to any type of public agrarian reform (INCRA) settlement project, unlike other studies (Peres & Schneider, 2012; Perz et al., 2010). Only a small area of *Ramal da Casa Branca* Community and *Ramal da Cachoeira* Community form part of the only INCRA settlement project in the municipality of Rio Preto da Eva. However, none of the research participants had their plots in those areas.

less stressful and more fulfilling than their city jobs, allowing space and time for creativity, and more meaningful relationships with others. Whilst there is a sizeable literature on urban–rural migration around the world, including to frontiers, beginning with [Brown and Wardwell's \(1980\)](#) seminal account of the rural U.S., to our knowledge, ours is the first study after [MacDonald and Winklerprins \(2014\)](#) to investigate this phenomenon in Amazonia from the perspective of the migrants themselves. The role of 'spontaneous' *ramais* in frontier development, on which our case is focused, has been analysed and described by [Arima et al. \(2013\)](#). They showed different settlement processes in the region of Itaituba, in Pará state, produce different forest fragmentation processes, but do not provide fine-grained analyses of the decisions taken by migrants nor the effects on their lives, as we do here.

2.1. Urban–rural migration as a frontier dynamic

The frontier colonization by urban–rural migrants we examine here needs to be understood in relation to the rapid expansion of the city of Manaus. Our study region is in the hinterlands of this metropolis, which has grown rapidly over the last fifty years, in part because of economic growth driven by a low-tax manufacturing district. Manaus has acted as a magnet for migration for huge numbers of people from rural areas and provincial towns elsewhere in Amazonia. Yet, now, after years or decades of putting up with poor standards of living in violent urban neighbourhoods, they are now migrating to new forest frontiers in search of a better life. The newly colonized region in this study is relatively 'pristine' in frontier terms; it has not been subject to large roadbuilding schemes characteristic of other regions such as around the BR-230 Transamazonica highway. Nor has it been subject to planned settlements and/or development projects, such as, incentives for colonising new areas ([Lui & Molina, 2009](#)), land reform projects ([Pacheco, 2009b](#)), or stimulus for economic activities such as mining and cattle ranching ([Hoelle, 2017](#); [Pacheco, 2012](#); [Rorato et al., 2020](#); [Sontter et al., 2017](#)). The frontiers we describe are somewhat distinct from 'typical' frontiers because Manaus is located in the middle of the Brazilian Amazon –surrounded by rainforest. Deforestation frontiers around Manaus are therefore not the result of frontier advance in the conventional sense of roadbuilding, deforestation and cattle ranching along the so-called 'arc of deforestation' pushing into the Amazon along a swathe from Belém in the Northeast to Rio Branco in the Southwest ([Fearnside 2005](#)).

The *ramais* that we focus on do not fit well with the categories of frontier established in the literature (see [Pacheco, 2012](#)). For instance, the idea of the 'commodity frontier' draws our attention to the processes and sites of the incorporation of resources into the expanding capitalist world economy over the last 600 years, such as sugar, soy, coffee and cotton, and then copper, palm oil, wheat and coal ([Beckert et al 2021](#)). Our case study region cannot be said to be primarily a commodity frontier. Rather, the motivation for the colonization of the frontiers in question is – we would argue – primarily about the search for a rural good life and an escape from a bad urban one, a phenomenon which has increased in step with the growth of cities in recent decades. A classic distinction in the deforestation literature is between pioneer and consolidated frontiers. The former is characterised as having a 'high discount rate' (present benefits are much more valuable than future benefits) linked to high land turnover rates, extended land speculation, and deforestation for land rights (rather than for production) and speculative land-grabbing based on expectations of profit from resale. Consolidated frontiers are characterized by capital investments in agriculture in order to increase profits. [Browder and Godfrey's \(1997\)](#) classic analysis, meanwhile distinguishes between populist and corporatist frontiers in Amazonia. Populist frontiers are made by smallholders, independent ('wildcat') min-

ers, petty merchants, that is, workers. Corporatist frontiers, by contrast, are dominated by capitalized enterprises pursuing activities such as large-scale cattle ranching, agribusiness (e.g., soy farming, albeit it was rare in Amazonia when Browder and Godfrey were developing their idea), tree plantations (examples in Pará state include eucalyptus for cellulose production in Jarí, and rubber-tree plantations in Belterra and Fordlandia), and large-scale extraction of timber or minerals (e.g., bauxite mines in Amapá). In reality, these two frontier types form a continuum, and indeed their interaction generates overlapping claims and, consequently, conflict over property rights and access to natural resources ([Schmink & Wood, 1992](#)). These approaches share a temporal tendency; the observation that forest frontiers often move from a 'populist' or 'pioneer stage' to the consolidated or corporatist one ([le Polain de Waroux et al., 2018](#)). More recently, the term 'neoliberal agricultural frontiers', has emerged for defining export-oriented farming areas – very often focused on soy – motivated more by global demand and land privatization than by government subsidies ([Brannstrom, 2009](#)).³

The frontiers in question in our study are certainly more easily characterized as 'populist' or 'pioneer' rather than 'corporatist', 'consolidated' or 'neoliberal'. But they do not fit clearly into these categories, either. Our research participants claimed to want a permanent life on the *ramais*, rather than merely wanting to speculate on land prices, or exploit resources for short-term gain, as is often true in pioneer frontiers. And whilst the frontier we describe is clearly populist, again the good life, rather than merely 'work,' seems to be the primary motivation for migration. Hence, what may be distinct about our case study region as a frontier, then, is that it is being populated by former urban poor in search of a good life. This underlines the need for an adequate theorization of freedom and the good life.

2.2. Capabilities: The good life as freedom, wellbeing and agency

We use the capabilities approach to help conceptualize human freedom as the meaning of development, following [Sen \(1990\)](#). This establishes normative criteria to allow assessment of wellbeing and judgments about justice and development, rather than primarily focusing on economic factors ([Nussbaum 2013](#)). Instead, the approach focuses on the effective opportunities that people have to lead the lives they have reason to value ([Robeyns, 2005](#)). The focus here is on the freedom of an individual to achieve the *beings* and *doings* (together these are called 'functionings') that she has reason to value in her life. Beings are *states of being*, for example being well or under-nourished, being anxious or being relaxed; whilst doings are activities such as caring for a child. Hence, capabilities are a person's real freedoms or opportunities to achieve functionings ([Nussbaum, 2013](#); [Robeyns, 2005](#)).

[Nussbaum \(2013\)](#) asserts that in order to ensure that people are able to pursue a dignified life, worthy of living and minimally flour-

³ Relevant work on migration to forest frontiers elsewhere includes [de Jong et al \(2006\)](#), which discusses urban–rural migration but without much detail. [Hecht et al \(2015:3\)](#) don't look at urban–rural migration *per se*, but their approach is relevant and useful. They note that the explanatory gap created by "highly economic" nature of much of the literature which understands migration as driven by economic imperatives has been filled since 2000 by work which shows how "social claims on resources, historical labor obligations, cultural patterns of reciprocity, institutions and, in some cases, violence" also shape migration patterns. They also underline that there is a lack of discussion of forms of migration other than rural to urban: "Discussions of international and internal migration often focus on rural–urban flows, but in many parts of the tropics there is significant migration from urban to rural, as well as rural to rural migration for wage opportunities especially in the clandestine timber and forest product trades, artisanal mining, infrastructure development and seasonal work opportunities." [Padoch et al \(2008\)](#) are mainly interested in the dynamics of rural–urban migration in Amazonia but do look at urban–rural and rural–urban interactions (in the context of multi-sited households) which is of relevance to the present study.

ishing, governments have to secure for all citizens at least a threshold level of ten central capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment (Nussbaum (2013: 33–35)). We are sympathetic to the clarity of pursuing central capabilities although we note Sen disagrees with this proposition of a universal list. He argues instead that selection of essential capabilities should be done through participatory democratic processes in particular contexts (Nussbaum, 2013; Sen, 1990).

The capabilities approach can also be seen as a new way of conceptualizing how overlapping but distinct concepts of agency and empowerment relate to wellbeing (Abel & Frohlich, 2012; Claassen, 2016; Drydyk, 2013; Gangas, 2016). Agency and empowerment can be conceptualized in many different ways, and so for clarity, following Drydyk (2013), we understand agency as autonomous personal involvement in activities; it is *not* about the consequences of those activities on a person's life: *it is about what goes into actions, not what comes out of them*. Empowerment, conversely, differs from agency in that it refers to both an expansion of power and a process of change, so it refers to both beings and doings. Empowerment here means 'expansion of the scope of agency', linking changes in the capacity for action to well-being in a way that the concept of agency alone cannot. From this view, wellbeing (as a state of being) is external to agency (because agency is just doings) but contributes to empowerment (because empowerment combines beings and doings).

Urban violence has been widespread in Latin America, and it disproportionately affects the poor because they are much more likely to become its victims (Briceño-León et al., 2008). It often creates a social atmosphere marked by generalized fear and lack of trust in others; this is compounded when institutions criminalize the poor (Caldeira, 2000; Garmany, 2014). Consequently, those from lower social classes often find themselves vulnerable, isolated and powerless in the face of their oppressive realities (Doran & Burgess, 2012; Gilligan, 2000). As a result, poor urban people find their agency constrained. This results in often insurmountable constraints on poor peoples' capabilities to *be* and to *do* in large cities in the Global South (Cavalcanti, 2006; Ferreira, 2015; Kerstenetzky & Santos, 2009). This situation has given rise to the novel phenomenon of frontier colonization through urban–rural migration, where children and grandchildren of the migrants who moved to Manaus—mostly post-1960—abandon the city for new forest frontiers in search of a better life.

2.3. Study area and methods

Data were collected in 2015, during fieldwork in three rural communities in the municipality of Rio Preto da Eva in Amazonas State, Brazil. The communities (*Ramal da Casa Branca*, *Ramal Bom Futuro* and *Ramal da Cachoeira*) are 30 km, 20 km and 20 km, respectively, from Rio Preto da Eva's urban centre, which is 81 km travel distance from the centre of Manaus (see Figures 1–3). *Rio Preto da Eva* was a district of Manaus until 1981, when it received the status of municipality (IBGE *Cidades*). At the time of the last official census in 2010 (IBGE 2010) Rio Preto da Eva had 25,719 inhabitants, and 52 % of them lived in rural areas. The municipality covers 5,815 km², and the vast majority (97 %) <https://mapbiomas.org/>) of its land was covered by rainforest in 2015. The colonization of rural Rio Preto da Eva resembles the infamous 'fishbone' deforestation pattern with deforested areas being initially opened up next to the state highway, AM-010. Most of the municipality's land officially belongs to Federal and State institutions, with land occupation in the area reflecting the typical pathway in the Amazon – spontaneous occupation followed by a long process of land tenure formalization. Rio Preto da Eva presents an essentially rural economy, with fruit cultivation being an

important agricultural sector.⁴ Ethical approval was obtained for this research from Lancaster University Ethics Committee (UREC reference RS2014/50).

The communities are on side-roads called *ramais*, connecting to a minor paved highway, AM-010. The *ramais* are mostly unpaved and in poor condition, with some parts unpassable in the rainy season. The exact number of residents in each of study communities was unclear, partly because plots of land are acquired and sold quite often. There were many uninhabited plots, although people in the communities knew their owners.⁵ According to a Community Health Agent (Portuguese acronym ACS) in the *Ramal da Casa Branca* community, there were 76 families living there. The *Ramal da Cachoeira* community leader affirmed that there are 72 families living in *Ramal da Cachoeira* and *Ramal Bom Futuro*.⁶

The families who participated in the research began establishing their houses and the *ramais* over the decade preceding fieldwork (2005–2015). Owing to the fact there was "nothing, only forest" when they arrived, the process took between two to five years each. Whilst they were the first settlers, the area had previously been illegally logged, and some of the families had bought their plots from loggers in transactions without official documents. Around two thirds of adult participants were born in rural areas and moved to the city during childhood (with their parents), where they lived most of their lives. The other third of participants were born and raised in an urban area in Amazonas State.⁷

⁴ Amazonas State Institute for Sustainable Development for Agriculture and Forestry (IDAM) – <https://www.idam.am.gov.br/?s=rio+preto+da+eva>.

⁵ Most of the land where the *ramais* are located is public, which is common in the Brazilian Amazon. The occupation of these lands follows a pattern commonplace in the Brazilian Amazon (Brown et al 2016): it occurs without formal titles and buying-selling transactions are normally registered by an informal receipt. According to Brazilian law, once you occupy public land with no signs of previous occupation, build a house and live there, no one can remove you from it, but you are not given any official titles. That is what happened in most situations in the *ramais*. The research participants reported that, in recent history, the first tracks in the forest were opened up by opportunistic loggers. By the time that the research participants had arrived, some pieces of land had already been occupied by loggers who had - themselves - delimited what they considered to be their plots. These lands were then sold without formal official titles, instead, receipts which provide informal "proof" of a change in "ownership" (legally, this is a change in occupier [squatter, *posseiro*], not change in owner per se). By the time of the fieldwork, most land transactions in the *ramais* were done using this type of receipt. According to the research participants, some plots in the *ramais* had been acquired by other urban residents, who never actually moved there, and instead sold them on to third parties. In some cases, the new owners migrated to the ramal to start a new life, in other cases the land remained uninhabited but held on to as an investment. Hence, some plots have changed "owner" quite often. An important implication of this informal process of buying and selling plots is ineligibility for most of the credits and loans for agriculture. Such schemes normally require a formal land title as a guarantee of return on investment to the creditors. This makes it makes it difficult for smallholders on the *ramais* to borrow money and invest, which adds to the difficult of developing successful livelihoods. Insecure land tenure can also leave smallholders vulnerable to land-grabbers who can press them to sell their lands for undervalued prices, or violently dispossess them (Campbell, 2015a).

⁶ The first author was invited to conduct research in selected communities after getting to know some residents from them. When she arrived in the municipality of Rio Preto da Eva with a view to conducting research there, she started to visit the weekend local food market and made contact with local farmers. At this point she found out that most farmers had moved recently (*ca* 10 years) moved from Manaus. Then she asked some farmers if she could visit and stay with them in their rural homes for a period, in order to get a deeper understanding of the new life they and others in the communities had chosen. She ended up staying with the ones that had some leadership role in the community or worked as Community Health Agent meaning they knew the community and its members well.

⁷ Thirty-seven families participated in research. Of them, the female or male heads of twenty-two were originally from rural areas and moved to a city or town when children, living in urban contexts since then. The heads of eleven participant families were born and raised in Manaus, living there most of their lives. Four families were exceptions to these patterns. Their heads were born in rural areas and spent most of their lives in such contexts, and moved to urban areas only recently before moving onto the *ramais*. Before moving to the *ramais*, nearly all participants were living in Manaus, except four of them that moved to the *ramais* from the urban centre of *Rio Preto da Eva* or two other municipalities in Amazonas (Manacapuru and Óbidos).

We adopted an ethnographic approach for data collection based on participant observation, open and semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The first author lived in these rural communities from March to August 2015 – two weeks in *Ramal da Casa Branca*, eight weeks in *Ramal Bom Futuro* and nine weeks in *Ramal da Cachoeira*. During these visits she had the opportunity to talk with approximately 8, 25 and 31 adult heads of households in these communities, respectively, along with seven young people. In each community she stayed with a local family. During fieldwork she engaged in family routines, taking part in their daily activities. She also joined communities' events including various meetings and social and religious gatherings. The first author would ask to spend a day or two with the *ramais'* residents accompanying them in their daily routine while discussing their life-stories: about how they got to that place, the challenges they had faced, how they were doing with establishing a new life, and any other stories they felt compelled to tell about the *ramais* and their life trajectories. In general, research participants were very enthusiastic about telling their stories. Hence, during those visits a series of oral histories emerged. The first author took fieldnotes during these interactions. Notes were subsequently written up on an encrypted computer and complemented with additional observations and information. Participant observation was used to validate information from interviews and to provide greater background detail. In order to deepen the conversations about observed differences in quality of life and wellbeing when comparing Manaus and the rural communities, two focus groups were conducted in *Ramal da Cachoeira*. The first was with six adults (all urban-rural migrants), who took part in a *mutirão* agricultural work group, which rotates working on each member's land in turn. The first author asked to join the *mutirão* and invited them to have a group conversation about how they compare changes in their wellbeing and quality of life in the city they had recently left behind and in the *ramal*. The second focus group comprised seven young people aged 11–18 years old. All of them were close relatives of the family that hosted the first author in *Ramal da Cachoeira*.⁸ Semi-structured interviews were conducted with state agents from IDAM (Institute for Sustainable Agricultural and Forest Development of the State of Amazonas), the state department responsible for providing agriculture technical assistance to rural producers, and members of local public offices such as the Municipal Secretariat of Agriculture. These interviews aimed to understand which kinds of assistance and policies were available to, and intended to assist, people from the *ramais*, and how these were implemented.⁹

3. Using capabilities to understand how urban-rural migration makes people free

This section contrasts narratives of research participants' former urban lives with their new lives at the frontier. In particular, we draw out our interlocutors' comparisons between their capabilities, as they were in Manaus, versus how they are on the *ramais*. It

⁸ They were living in Manaus and were used to spending the weekends with their relatives in *Ramal da Cachoeira*, occasions that allowed them and the first author to get to know each other. The first author invited these young people to talk about how they used to feel in the *ramais*, how was their life in Manaus and how they imagined their future. Permission for having this group conversation was obtained from the adults responsible for these young people. The first author also asked for some of these adults to be present during the focus group and two of them accompanied the whole conversation.

⁹ Questions included: what types of assistance and policies are available for developing agricultural activities? What are the bureaucratic steps required to access them? How often do you visit the *ramais*? Do you know community leaders? How often have you been contacted by people from the *ramais* asking for assistance? Are there projects happening in those areas? In your view, what are the major needs of people from those areas? Etc. Notes were taken during and after these interviews that helped to better understand the local context and then analysed using the literature.

shows how the urban-rural move, and subsequently struggling for rights and recognition, makes possible a series of capability improvements. Put differently, people were able to transform a situation of capability failures (Piva da Silva et al., 2021) in the city, through a move to a forest frontier. The section looks at the city and the forest frontier in turn, drawing out the differences in safety, hierarchy and social stigma, and stress and health in each location.

3.1. Capability failures in the city

Our interlocutors' experiences of threats to their life and bodily integrity resonate with the experiences of many urban dwellers, especially the poorer ones, in Amazonian metropolises and elsewhere in Brazil and Latin America (Piva da Silva et al., 2021, see also Koonings & Krujit, 2007; Orellana et al., 2017). Everyday risks to life and bodily integrity, as Lúcia and others described, have negatively affected urban dwellers' emotions, mostly through insecurity fear and anxiety (Doran & Burgess, 2012). It makes people limit their everyday urban life (e.g., staying indoors, avoiding walking on the streets, restricting leisure activities, etc.) in order to protect themselves.

Many people now living along frontier colonisation roads had previously experienced urban violence: the risks of robbery, assault, physical attacks and sexual violence had been part of their former lives. As Lúcia explained: "In Manaus, one lives in a prison, you're always worried to walk on the streets and be assaulted, or your house robbed. Here, I can be outside without any worry". Even if not directly affected themselves, all the research participants knew others who were victims of violence, or had witnessed it. Sandra and José had frequently heard gunshots and seen corpses on their old street. Alba, a current resident of *Ramal do Bom Futuro*, told us that most of her children's friends from the *Jorge Teixeira* neighbourhood are dead, the majority killed deliberately. Her daughter and now-neighbour described how she had been mugged for her cell phone many times in Manaus, sometimes including being threatened with weapons. These stories were typical.

Life on the forest frontier provides the opportunity to escape urban social stigmas. Many had previously had 'blue-collar' jobs in the city, including working as housekeepers, manual factory employees, construction workers, or drivers of taxis, buses or trucks. These occupations are seen as low down in the vastly unequal social strata of Brazil (Despres, 1991). Some people reported they were humiliated by their city jobs: João, a former builder and current resident of *Ramal Cachoeira*, said that what most motivated him to move to *Ramal da Cachoeira* was that "I started to realise that I was building houses for others; those who hired me wouldn't even let me into the houses to eat during my lunch break. So, I thought, I am building all these houses which I can't get into even to eat when I am working. Then I asked myself – what kind of life is this? And then I decided to move here where I feel much better."

As Carmen, a self-employed resident of a low-income neighbourhood in Manaus frustratedly pointed out, the money she and the other members of her family earn in the city is sufficient *only to survive and not to live*. What Carmen meant was they all work hard and are almost unable to pay for the basics, including water and energy bills and food. Also, Carmen constantly felt tired and resented her lack of time and money for leisure and recreation – both things she felt were essential to her wellbeing. The lack of time for non-work activities has been reported among the urban working class in other countries, as well (Jarvis et al., 2001; Roy et al., 2004). The stress of daily routines for Carmen and others in Manaus is further compounded by the fear of violence related to trips to and from work (Sánchez, 2006). As Joaquim, a resident from *Ramal Bom Futuro* said – "When I lived in the city and worked as a bus driver, I was anxious all the time. I arrived at home after a

working day very tired and stressed. The last thing I wanted to do, by that time, was to play with my kids. I just wanted to go to bed, which used to make me feel guilty and even more stressed”.

3.2. Capability improvements on the forest frontier

On this forest frontier people feel relatively safe. Normal daily activities are no longer a source of worry and fear, which enables people to become much more active. Lúcia and her peers spend most of the day outside their houses, which are not fortified. During time spent on the *ramais*, a different picture of life emerged. The ‘new’ rural folk engage in activities such as planting crops, looking after animals, visiting neighbours, enjoying and appreciating the landscape, listening to the birds and relaxing in their hammocks usually hung outside their houses. Several people remarked that they now slept much better at night, freed from worrying about night-time robbery and able to enjoy a much cooler climate than in Manaus. This situation is more reminiscent of Amazonian rural riverine life (away from road-based frontiers), which is often relatively peaceful, as documented in Harris’ (2000) ethnographic account. This is quite different to other, often violent, narratives of Amazonian farm-forest frontiers. Frontier advance elsewhere (e.g. in Pará state in the eastern Amazon) has long been associated with violence and lawlessness¹⁰ (Hoefle, 2006; Simmons et al., 2007; Souza et al., 2015; Torres et al., 2017).

There is not, however, a total absence of physical violence or threats to bodily integrity on the *ramais*. During fieldwork there were sporadic incidents including thefts, violence against women, fights among community members and between them and some visitors, especially during festivities. However, in general people feel safe in those *ramais*, and more able to work together to find solutions to these sporadic manifestations of violence and other social problems. Consequently, parents feel less pressure to be indoors and to keep children inside, according to research participants. Indeed, children are encouraged to play outdoors, which is clearly important for their development and wellbeing from a capabilities viewpoint (Ballet et al., 2011; Bjorklund & Brown, 1998). The children themselves obviously feel the difference, as one of them who lives in *Bom Futuro* reported. She said that she does not like going to Manaus because there her parents make her stay indoors, which makes her bored and frustrated. Perceived safety, reported by many informants, has enabled them to feel less fearful, worried and tense about both about their physical integrity and the security of their belongings. It has helped them to feel more relaxed, and sufficiently confident to perform important functionings such as freely moving around in the *ramais*, feeling safe and enjoying being outdoors working, and/or enjoying some leisure time in their plots, and getting to

¹⁰ It’s possible that the communities we describe here are in a peaceful phase, which could potentially be followed by a more violent phase especially if or when land speculation accelerates. Recent literature underlies the various forms of violence that characterize Amazonian forest frontiers. Brown et al. (2016) examine land occupations as responses to social inequity between landholders and landless people. They see the “occupations” as a form of redistribution (and source of deforestation), emphasizing how squatters are exposed to violence from landholders during this process. Urzedo and Chatterjee (2021) concentrate on how deforestation and frontier advance has involved historical genocide (including violent invasions by goldminers and loggers) and ongoing dispossession of indigenous people. Azevedo-Ramos et al. (2020) emphasize how federal dismantling of environmental agencies and indigenous land rights is opening up frontier advance and likely to increase land conflicts and rural violence. Souza et al (2015) use quantitative analysis of data from the entire Brazilian Amazon to argue that violence closely follows the expansion of economic frontiers and is driven by deforestation and livestock production but not grain production. So certain types of recent occupation promote violence. Tallman et al (2020) contend that inequities and conflicts related to highway development and frontier advance constitute “ecosyndemics”. For instance, highway construction in the Peruvian Amazon enables vector-borne illnesses, increases sex work and sexually-transmitted infections, and increases psychological distress caused by violence, delinquency, and the erosion of social cohesion.

know their neighbours. Interacting with neighbours progressively led them to trust each other more and collaborate among themselves in order to face and overcome the challenges inherent to establishing a new rural life. For instance, research participants exchanged the use of agricultural machinery and labor-in-kind when they lacked money to pay in cash. To illustrate, José borrowed Francisco’s tractor to excavate earth in order to create a fish pond. He returned the favour by doing some agricultural work (weeding, planting, harvesting, etc.) in Francisco’s plot. Likewise, it was commonplace for vehicle-owners to provide other individuals or families with a lift into town. In a sense, there was mutual recognition among people on the *ramais* that they shared similar socioeconomic circumstances. And, while they struggled in different ways to prosper in their new rural locale, they also felt less oppressed by social hierarchy or competitiveness, which they reported having felt in the city. This appears to have fostered feelings of belonging and dignity. When asked if they would go back to the city they usually responded with a resounding ‘no.’ They had left the city in part because they were deprived of basic rights, such as the right to security, freedom, and equality (Piva da Silva et al., 2021; Câmara dos Deputados do Brasil, 2012).

Our interpretation is that the safety of the *ramais* leads to improvements in not only wellbeing (beings), as we have just seen, but also agency (doings), as we will see, and so can be said to be empowering, if the latter is understood as combining beings and doings in an extension of the scope of agency. What the research participants said they were missing most in their lives when they decided to leave the city and live in the *ramais* were security, peace and freedom. People living in violent metropolises may struggle to trust each other, often avoiding interactions with neighbours and strangers, making life rather solitary (Ferreira, 2015; Sánchez, 2006; da Silva & Leite, 2007). We argue that the shift from a big city to the new colonist communities forces people to engage in new forms of socialisation and affiliation. These activities are helpful or even essential for establishing rural livelihoods in the forest frontier, leading to novel encounters and on an aggregate level, the creation of place and community. These transitions are defined by changes in levels of trust and dignity. The less hierarchical nature of rural social life (supported by efforts of community organisers to create opportunities for listening to community members’ needs in long-running meetings) in the early-phase of the colonisation process may have ameliorated the discomfort commonly observed in interactions among people from different social classes (Anderson, 1999; Caldeira, 2000; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). People reported it made them more comfortable with themselves and also to get close to people they do not know very well.

Maria is a resident of *Ramal Cachoeira* and moved there with her husband eight years prior to fieldwork, in 2007. She stated, “Here [in *Ramal Cachoeira*] I feel good, I get along well with everybody. Here nobody looks at us [me and my family] with disdain. Nobody says; ‘don’t go to Maria’s place because her son is a thief or a killer’. There is nothing like that here. Here I can walk holding my head up”. Hence, the dignity that Maria expressed is probably a reflection of a more egalitarian social context where social stratification is less apparent than in the city (Farmer, 1999). Most research participants took similar paths to establishing a life along the *ramais*. They all came from urban working-class backgrounds – albeit some better off than others – with few resources to begin a new life. As they often said, they were building new rural lives “from zero.” Hence, neighbours share relatively similar financial and social (dis)advantages, in stark contrast with large Brazilian cities, where differences between the rich and poor are shocking. It is now well documented that class divisions and inequality can lead to poor self-worth. Therefore, dignity, in modern societies, is strongly linked to social status and in hierarchical capitalist societies, this is normally defined by material wealth (Marmot, 2004; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010).

Improvements in women's wellbeing, when comparing the *ramais* and the city, turn out to be even more evident than men's, because the city-life seems even more oppressive for women than men. While drug trafficking violence disproportionately affects young men, women are more vulnerable to everyday violence in the city than men. Moreover, these women reported having partaken in little political and community engagement in Manaus. Women had mentioned having very few opportunities in the city to leave their houses (apart from going to work and sometimes church) and they feared to walk alone (or with their children) on the streets because of violence. These women's leadership in those rural communities appears more linked to the new rural context: it is a much safer environment compared with the city. Consequently, the women are less fearful for their bodily integrity, feeling more confident to act in their environment (Chant, 2013); there are more opportunities for affiliation. They feel less isolated than in the city. They have more opportunities to know each other and to trust others. Moreover, the parents among them are less worried about threats to their children's physical integrity, given violence is relatively rare. It is partly due to the absence of 'urban' social problems like drug trafficking, a prevalent threat or perhaps temptation to marginalised youth in large cities (Zaluar, 2000).

Most people perceived that their physical and mental health had improved following their move to the countryside. As Lúcia said - "Moving to this place saved my life. I used to be constantly ill in Manaus, going to the hospital all the time. Here I almost never need to go to the hospital. I would have died much sooner if I continued to live in Manaus". Others described remarkable improvements in their health, with reduced medication and fewer visits to doctors in comparison with when they lived in Manaus. Such apparent improvements in health and wellbeing appear related to these moves to the forest frontier. It is well established that a sedentary urban life - combined with worry, fear and anxiety - can be damaging to physical, psychological and emotional health (Ewart & Suchday, 2002; Gilligan, 2000; Henson & Reyns, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). There is also strong evidence that densely populated urban areas with few green spaces - such as Manaus - can be linked with the prevalence of a range of serious physical and mental health problems as well (Lee & Maheswaran, 2011; Maas et al., 2006; Mitchell & Popham, 2008).

We interpret informants' narratives around living in a safer and cooler place, surrounded by forest, as having contributed to significant improvements in the fundamental capabilities of bodily integrity, health and emotional wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2013). Our understanding, therefore, is that people can live physically, and emotionally-healthier lives on the *ramais* and perform fundamental functionings and capabilities related to wellbeing. This is in stark contrast with their urban lives when they felt their capacity for beings and doings constrained (Piva da Silva et al., 2021).

In Nussbaum's terms, these activities foster the central capabilities of emotions and affiliation. Most research participants appreciated and valued being close to their family, even if the relationships were not always peaceful. Also, daily routines on the *ramais* seemed to be felt by the colonists as less exhausting and time-consuming, in comparison with their routines in Manaus. Instead, they had some free time to do things they enjoy. These activities included spending time with the kids, watching TV, learning to play a musical instrument, making art crafts, talking to neighbours or family, and relaxing in their hammocks. We understand these pastimes as opportunities to develop the capabilities related to sense, imagination and thoughts. But these capabilities were also employed in the diverse livelihoods observed on the *ramais*.

The capability improvements detailed above point to an expansion in the scope of agency, that is to say, empowerment, which embraces changes in both (well-)being and doing (agency). People

felt safer, enjoyed more relaxing and fulfilling everyday lives in both work and recreational activity, slept better and enjoyed better physical health, whilst children appreciated being able to play outdoors (improvements in being). These changes facilitated new functionings, including greater dignity and new forms of social interaction and organization, which we now examine.

4. Social organization, access to land, and livelihoods on the *ramais*

This section examines social activities and agrarian livelihoods on the *ramais*. It reveals how capability improvements as a result of the initial urban-rural move, especially relating to sociability and creativity, feed into an expansion in the scope of agency. That is, empowerment, evidenced in the realization of rural livelihoods, which involves working together with others and attempting to realize various rights. The section looks at social organization, land access and livelihoods, in turn.

4.1. Social organization

Whilst families do not necessarily make the urban-rural move with the intention of forming a community, perhaps thinking quite individualistically to start with, they typically find that in order to gain recognition and rights from governmental institutions and practice farming they need to organise collectively. We observed that social inequalities are less evident in the *ramais* than in the city, which we understand as contributing to the colonists' self-reported improvements in dignity and self-worth. The scarcity of non-kin labour and relative unaffordability of hired labour creates demand and opportunities for new ways of working together. Specifically, working relationships that rely more on cooperation rather than competition and patron-client inequalities. Labour-sharing helps to bring people closer together, which builds trust. As people share their struggles and feel relatively equal, there comes new opportunities for a sense of commonality. As one person remarked, "We are kind of in the same boat, so we better help each other." A *mutirão*—an Amazonian work describing a collective work group—is one way for people to help each other with some specific tasks that would be very difficult or take a long time if done alone.

Social encounters in the communities generally occurred when people needed to talk about issues related to their livelihoods. For example, the process of acquiring definitive land titles, knowledge exchange about agricultural activities, courses, government programs and credits, *ramais'* infrastructure etc. Rural life presents significant opportunities to meet and get close to people. In everyday life many people also value privacy, sometimes exchanging little about their personal lives with neighbours. Nevertheless, new relationships emerged over time. People appreciated being in a social context where trust and dignity were more likely to be felt. Even if the rural folk appeared to value privacy, they also recognised that joining forces was important to succeed in the *campo* (countryside). Besides, it was through their collective attempts to prosper that they got to know their neighbours and, consequently, not fear them as they used to in the city.

Several people related how they had become more independent, no longer fearful of doing things alone. Social organization was shaped both by the process of feeling safer, and the necessity of collective actions for improving livelihoods. Feeling safer in the *ramais* than in the city had numerous effects of people's lives. First, people became more comfortable in being alone, and independently undertaking everyday tasks, outside in their plots, in stark contrast to the urban sensation of 'living in a prison' (see Piva da Silva et al., 2021). Second, being outside and less cautious enabled

people to develop relationships; opening up, getting to know and trust their neighbours, appreciating and supporting their shared struggles to develop and maintain rural livelihoods. Feeling safer and freer allowed for social get-togethers and community organisation of ideas and energies for the pursuit of common goals. These goals were sometimes livelihood-specific (e.g. organizing an agricultural *mutirão*) or the deployment of their collective 'soft power' (e.g. acts intended to emphasize shame, blame, or responsibility) to pressure state authorities and obtain secure land tenure. Greater trust on the *ramais* was apparent when comparing previous urban lives with the new rural ones. For instance, Maria a former resident of *Ramal Cachoeira*, said that in Manaus, she was afraid to say hello to people in the street or buses, so, she would almost never engage with others when out in public. Whereas she'd had little or no social contact with her urban neighbours, on the *ramal* she felt much safer and rather than being scared of talking to her neighbours she enjoyed interacting with them. Other people reported similar things. Also, unlike the city, it was relatively common for residents of the *ramais* to visit their neighbours when they needed help with problems that they could not solve alone, sometimes in the form of offering an exchange of labour. This all adds up to greater familiarity with organizing and taking collective actions when needed. Organizing in the city would have been harder owing to a lack of daily interaction and trust among people.

Joana, a resident of *Ramal Bom Futuro*, spent most of her time at home when living in Manaus, scared to go out alone. Yet on the *ramal* she became very socially active, even taking on the voluntary leadership role of elected Community President. The residents self-organised in order to gain recognition from the state: forming an association and electing a secretariat and a leader --- the community president. This type of spontaneous community organisation has been seen in other parts of Amazonia as well (Castro & Cordeiro, 2015; Hoefle, 2004). Women are central to the social organization of the *ramais*. In the three case-study communities, the leaders were all women¹¹ who were very socially engaged and committed to bringing better infrastructure, services and opportunities for agricultural production to the *ramais*, often challenging local authorities and institutions. Two of these leaders were considering formal engagement with the local political scene by becoming a candidate for municipal councillor (*vereador*). They were also active participants in courses about agricultural production, bringing technical knowledge to their households. Men in *ramais* normally stayed working in their farms most of the time and were less socially engaged.

Among the Amazonian peasantry ---regionally known as *riberinhos* or *caboclos* --- a key part of women's life and social interactions is focussed on their homegardens, which function as both a reservoir of agrobiodiversity and a key site for the (re)production of local knowledge (Murrieta and WinklerPrins 2003). Our research participants were not really *riberinhos* or *caboclos* (although their grandparents may well have been), rather, they are *colonos* (colonists). Most of the plots on the *ramais* did not have a clearly defined homegarden. The majority of women interviewed did spend some

time caring for cultivated plants around their houses, but most of their energy and time were spent cultivating fields of vegetables, banana, manioc and in doing domestic work. Unlike Murrieta and WinklerPrins' study, women of the *ramais* seldom used medicinal plants and rarely spent time with other women in homegardens. Our interpretation is that the women on the *ramais*, having grown up in the city, had lost the local knowledge and culture of homegarden cultivation and its use as a space where women can meet, which their grandmothers and great-grandmothers would likely have had.

4.2. Land access

Land access and ownership are key at forest frontiers. In Brazil, the right to property has historically been pursued via illegal land invasions (Campbell, 2015b; Holston, 2008; Torres et al., 2017). The lack of definitive land titles remained a major, omnipresent issue for inhabitants of the *ramais*. Most settler families had occupied their smallholding by occupying land, or had bought it from someone that had previously occupied it. In the latter case, the buyer is normally provided with an informal contract or receipt by the seller, not equivalent to an official title. Most of the area occupied by these rural communities was officially designated as public lands and/or land eventually earmarked for future plans to settle small farmers with no land tenure through an officially-sanctioned colonization process (i.e. through INCRA). Therefore, not having the title was a major source of insecurity for our interlocutors, as it is for many in the rural Amazon (Campbell, 2015a).

By law, once land is settled, occupiers cannot be evicted (Câmara dos Deputados do Brasil, 2012). However, lacking a definitive land title exposes colonists to having their land claims questioned either by the government, neighbours or strangers, leading to conflicts (Campbell, 2015a). Moreover, a definitive land title is normally a basic requirement for accessing agricultural credit, loans and subsidies. Therefore, pressing the government to regularize their lands was often a primary goal of our research participants. Access to definitive land titles has been a complicated obstacle to these urban-rural migrants, and smallholders elsewhere in Amazonia (Campbell, 2015a, 2015b; Hecht, 2011; Pacheco, 2009a). Oral histories collected in the field elucidated the 'spontaneous' unplanned history of the *ramais*. The roads were constructed as a result of social mobilization among new immigrants that served to pressure the municipal government to improve access to the newly occupied land. When the first colonists arrived in the study area, the access to those lands was via tracks they opened themselves inside the forest. After settling, the colonists pressured the municipality to build roads fit for vehicles (e.g. cars, motorcycles, etc.) and to connect their lands to existing other roads, such as the AM-010. Slowly, the local government attended to some of these demands, opening unpaved roads, that is, *ramais*.

Government support is crucial for most rural Amazonians to be able to achieve land demarcation (Campbell 2015a,b; Torres et al. 2017), and this is why our informants spent a considerable amount of effort, including various forms of collective action, in trying to get the recognition necessary to obtain it. The lack of infrastructure, land titles, access to technologies and technical assistance and services are regarded as the major hurdles to small farmers' economic prosperity (Garrett et al. 2017) in the Amazon, which has serious implications for poverty and inequality reduction at a regional level (Guedes et al., 2012; Ludewigs & Brondízio, 2009). In our study, those who appeared to be doing somewhat better than others had access to public bank loans and/or to government agricultural extension projects. For instance, they owned vehicles and engaged in activities that provided income - although not always on a regular basis - such as banana cultivation, horticulture

¹¹ Here we have quoted more powerful women in order to show their role in leadership, but we also interviewed various women who were not leaders. Interestingly, they too acquired new responsibilities within their families, significantly contributing to the family's new rural livelihoods. For instance, non-leader women were, many times, taking the lead in preparing their products for sale in the local town market, organising themselves to transport their products (those who didn't have a vehicle), and in selling their products at market. Quite often, men didn't even go the town market, instead staying in the community. Some women took courses and participated in meetings related to agricultural practices, access to credits, land tenure etc. outside of the communities. Nonetheless, we also talked to some women (around six of them) that seemed to be quite dependent on their male partners for everything related to their livelihoods. Given the unique context of these *ramais*, we would tend not to generalize our findings to other rural locations.

and fish-farming. Colonists were acutely aware of the importance of accessing this government support in order to become economically self-sufficient. People from the rural communities we studied were active in pursuing their social benefits and universal rights as prescribed by law. However, accessing the relevant government programs is difficult. As one of the colonists put it, they had to “*tirelessly run after them*”.

4.3. Livelihoods

Smallholders struggle to generate income from agriculture in many locations in rural Amazonia because of similar factors to those operating in the *ramais*: lack of infrastructure and services, difficulties to access markets and credit, lack of access to technologies and technical information etc. (Guedes et al., 2012; Ludewigs & Brondizio, 2009). Nevertheless, smallholders in our study had also developed some strategies to cope with this situation, strategies which had significantly improved since they arrived. In the beginning, most people were earning money mainly from wood extraction and charcoal production, which was extremely labour demanding and low paid. Nowadays, they have diversified their assets somewhat (e.g., cars bought with loans, agricultural machinery) and activities (e.g., practising horticulture, growing perennial crops such as banana and fish-farming) but, income is still low and sometimes inconsistent. Lack of prior farming experience for some can make this difficult and people have to “*make things work*”. These conditions cause frustration and stress from time to time, yet these issues seem to be outweighed by perceived improvements in wellbeing, stimulating attempts to generate more income from the land.

Many people on this new frontier were interested in producing food in a more environmentally-friendly way, open to practices such as avoiding agrochemicals. They were interested in producing food sustainably, building permanent livelihoods around this, based on what were essentially agroecological and organic food principles. They believed that more sustainably produced food would be appealing to consumers in Manaus. They felt they shared, with urban dwellers, the view that the food that is consumed in the city is full of agrochemicals which they knew was not good for health. They had also been influenced by IDAM and NGOs in the *ramais* that tried to introduce agro-ecological practices and principles and promote a local municipal market of ‘organic food,’ or at least food with little or no agrochemicals. Some of them were already producing food in this way, and commercializing it in the local market and networks in Manaus as organic, or agrochemical-free. Timmermann and Félix (2015:530) contend that agroecology can deliver improvements to many of Nussbaum’s central capabilities: (i) Bodily health is improved by the lack of exposure to agrochemicals, and fitness from physical labour (when not excessive) and better diet; (ii) Senses, imagination and thought are improved by problem-solving and the creativity needed to successfully run a unique, biodiverse farm (as opposed to a monoculture); (iii) relationships with Other species is improved by in living in (and indeed being the steward of) an unpolluted and biodiverse natural environment, interacting with multiple species; (iv) Affiliation is improved through the cooperation with neighbouring smallholders, necessary to managed shared ecosystems (e.g., pollination, water regulation), and the good social skills necessary to work cooperatively (see discussion on *mutirão* in section 4.1).

As these new smallholders experiment with what may or may not work well on their land, there is plenty of space for learning, innovation and creativity. One example was innovative ways of farming fish. Vicente, for instance, created an irrigation system through his own knowledge combined with his observation of other colonists’ fish-farming and irrigation systems. Other farmers

had developed similar systems which they considered would best work for them. They were very proud of their creations and solutions which they worked out themselves when facing a problem in their rural livelihoods. In their narratives about their previous urban lives they rarely mentioned enjoying their city jobs, or having the space and opportunities for manifesting their capacities to create which helps to enhance one’s sense of autonomy, agency and control over their environment which they report for the rural space (Claassen, 2016; Nussbaum, 2013).

Research participants were able to use their senses, imagination and thought more in their rural work and free time on the *ramais*, compared to in their previous urban lives. This was borne out in their aforementioned narratives on, for example, free time and fish-farming. In addition, they reported feeling more in charge of their labour, its products and their time. Moreover, participants pointed out that they were not engulfed by exhausting urban poorly-paid jobs over which the poor may lack control (Roy et al., 2004) and everyday routines characterised by limited free time, exposure to overwhelming traffic and air pollution, and the threat of violence. We interpret that, in general, their new rural lives gave them a sense of autonomy and control over their daily activities and their immediate environment, which has been linked to improved health and wellbeing (Farmer, 1999; Marmot, 2004; Nussbaum, 2013).

5. Concluding discussion

We wanted to know why and how colonists experience changes in their freedom, agency and well-being through urban–rural migration as a frontier dynamic—hitherto little examined in the literature—near the rainforest metropolis of Manaus, and how this relates to their ideas of the good life. We found that people moving from the metropole to new forest frontiers tend to experience significant improvements in their capabilities, benefiting their capacities to be and to do. We provide an important counterpoint to Easterlin et al (2011)’s finding that in the majority world, based on quantitative metrics, there tends to be a significant ‘urban advantage’ in development, including life satisfaction. But these improvements in capabilities were achieved in the absence of basic social rights, including the right to education, to infrastructure, to an adequate standard of living, and housing. Migrants left their houses and jobs in the city to move to a place where, as they said, “*there was nothing, only forest*”. In order to gain recognition and rights, they had to organize collectively.

Our paper contributes to the literature on social understandings of forest frontiers, highlighting novel forms of political practice and subjectivity that have emerged in peoples’ lives and struggles. In particular, we revealed women’s protagonism in overcoming the challenges they face in moving to the forest frontier and making a life there, in response to an oppressive urban reality characterized by inequality and violence (Piva da Silva et al., 2021). These social benefits of the frontier are missed by approaches to the frontier that frame migrants as utilitarian economic agents (e.g. Tritsch and Le Tourneau 2016). We used the capabilities approach to reveal how non-monetary benefits, including bodily health and integrity, senses, imagination and thought, and affiliation are what people appreciate about their new lives and livelihoods.¹²

¹² This chimes with quantitative evidence that also shows how non-monetary benefits shape land use choices in Brazilian Amazonia. Garrett et al (2017) drew on measures of subjective wellbeing among rural producers, using numeric measures of overall life-satisfaction and eight sub-dimensions. Interestingly, mean satisfaction scores were highest for perceived security and ‘quality’ of neighbors, relative to satisfaction scores for transportation, health services, or education. Moreover, household-level variation in subjective wellbeing was not associated with monetary income, whereas subjective wellbeing was positively linked to time-on-farm, mixed-cropping, and proximity to town.

When situating our findings within the literature, two salient questions emerge: firstly, does this form of colonization in Amazonia (nearly always at forest frontiers) benefit the people involved? The answer here is clear, at least during the first decade of colonization. The narratives of improvements in well-being of urban-rural migrants—which we thought through drawing on the capabilities approach—would appear to answer this question in the affirmative, even if the state fails to deliver on many aspects of their responsibilities toward them as rights-bearing citizens, and if it is uncertain how this improvement will remain in the future. Whilst the novel frontier settlements we have presented here are not ‘formal’ INCRA colonization settlements, from a development perspective, these ‘informal’ *ramais* fit into the same arena of inquiry. Simmons et al. (2010) provide an overview of what they term “direct action land reform,” both spontaneous, like the case we presented here, and led by what they term “social movement organizations.” A key insight is that while state action through INCRA provides the legal foundation for land tenure, state *inaction* provides the motivation.

Secondly, what do these informal settlements mean for forests? That is, to what extent are they environmentally sustainable? Indeed, colonist settlements at forest frontiers are infamous in Amazonia for their high rates of deforestation (Peres and Schneider 2012). This environmental consequence of frontier colonization is almost by definition, given the settlements are structured around converting forest into farmland. Indeed, INCRA have often faced severe criticism (including from other ministries in the government and the Public Prosecutors Office (e.g., Amazonas *Atual*, 2020) for the environmental consequences of their projects and investments. INCRA has responded to this with different types of settlement which are supposed to be more ‘ecological’ (e.g., Agroextractivist Settlement Projects - PAE). We found colonists keen to experiment with forms of sustainable production such as agroforestry and fish-farming and ensuring government support for such forms of environmentally sustainable production is a key policy recommendation (see below).

The Brazilian state—including in the Amazon—frequently fails to provide citizens with the rights necessary to live a good life (Caldeira, 2000; Holston 2008). But through the process of urban-rural migration, many of our informants became aware of what it is to be right-bearing citizens, not only exercising agency in actualizing some of these rights, but also becoming empowered. That is, extending their scope for agency, in a way it seemed they never were able to in their urban lives. In colonists’ narratives about their previous urban lives it appeared to be difficult for them to see solutions and how to respond to things they were most unhappy about (e.g. physical and structural violence, see Piva da Silva et al., 2021). These new smallholders considered that, in the long-term, becoming economically self-reliant *and* enjoying improved capabilities are inseparable.

Nevertheless, although advances were made regarding improvements to the *ramais*’ infrastructure and economic opportunities, this new frontier is still poorly served by public services, and the desired improvement of their livelihoods is, as yet, not fully realized. Future capabilities in rural Amazonia are intrinsically linked to access to education, both now and in the future. Education is profoundly important in enabling children to thrive and flourish (Ballet et al 2011; Hart and Brando 2018; Saito 2003). A long-term failure to provide young people in the *ramais* with a good education will likely become a serious limitation for hybrid forms of rural living (Dodd, 2020; Parry et al., 2010). Education has been associated with improved capacities among Amazonians to engage with non-farm jobs and to contribute with investments on land helping smallholders to diversify their portfolio of assets, an important factor to reduce poverty (Guedes et al., 2009).

Although the colonists have been able to experience an increased capacity for beings and doings (Nussbaum, 2013) in building a new rurality, their long-term freedoms remain threatened by restricted access to basic social rights, economic instability and by the weakening of the welfare state (Watts, 2016). This situation can leave urban-rural migrants with few means to resist land speculation (that is, resist the temptation to sell land cheap to capitalized ranchers) and to adopt unsustainable economic activities, that offer quick economic returns in the short term, such as charcoal production and wood extraction, but that are ultimately environmentally damaging and undermining of longer-term sustainability (Broadbent et al., 2008; Chidumayo & Gumbo, 2013). Moreover, as the frontier develops, the colonists will likely face threats of farm consolidation and mechanized agriculture, which have contributed to rural depopulation in more consolidated frontiers in Amazonia (Schmink et al. 2019).

A number of policy-recommendations emerge from our work. Our case bears out Stoian’s (2005) argument that rural livelihood activities have potential for poverty alleviation (which we have understood in terms of capabilities) for urban and *peri*-urban dwellers. But these livelihoods need support. The Brazilian state should address the social dimensions of these new forest frontiers by recognizing and supporting the potential of these settlements as valid opportunities that contribute to human well-being and flourishing. Not least because of the existence and mission of INCRA and state-level land reform agencies, whose remit should encompass these informal ‘spontaneous’ settlements. This could be achieved by recognizing these forest frontiers as Agroextractivist Settlement Projects (PAE), the existing land tenure modality that best fits the characteristics of the *ramais*. This would help make the urban-rural migrants more visible to the state.

Existing state support for smallholder agriculture (e.g., IDAM in Amazonas State, EMATER in Pará State), which plays an indirect role in up-skilling new colonists, should be extended to the urban-rural migrants. The state should guide and support livelihood and landscape management toward more ecological approaches such as agroecology and agroforestry, as has already happened elsewhere (Schmink et al., 2019) to mitigate deforestation risks typical of forest frontiers, and which have been associated with improved capabilities (Timmermann & Félix, 2015). The unregulated nature of these frontiers leaves the potential for their having destructive effects on nature and also on the maintenance of the achieved capabilities. Wittman (2010) looks at Landless Workers Movement (MST, a Brazilian rural social movement for land reform) settlers in terms of their individual and collective action, ecological citizenship, agroecology and the protection of their own environmental resources. The promotion of agroecology could be one route to state recognition of a PAE for urban-rural migrants, since it is exactly the kind of livelihood that PAE territorial units are intended for.

The main issue is that in some Brazilian states (such as Amazonas) the government lacks capacity to improve wellbeing in urban areas, or support rural communities. More money needs to be directed to the Brazilian Amazon, both at the federal level, e.g. INCRA employing more staff there, and at the municipal-level, where agricultural and health institution staff also need to be trained and equipped, in order to be able to visit and engage with communities more regularly. An important implication of our work is that a governmental failure to improve the living conditions of inner-city Amazonians is going to lead to further deforestation and frontier advance in the metropolitan ‘hinterlands,’ even in the absence of government support for these moves.

There has been high-profile work on what urbanization means for forests (Defries et al., 2010; Seto et al., 2012) but this research assumes a linear process towards increasing urbanization,

particularly in the tropics. Yet, it is well documented in western countries (and elsewhere) that there comes a point that many people decide an inner-city life is not for them, and head out to the suburbs or into the countryside. This process has been referred to as 'counterurbanization,' 'deurbanization', 'rurbanization' (see Krause, 2013), with –in our case – the frontier colonization process working as an 'escape valve' for people who cannot bear life in Manaus any more. Yet the concept most relevant to understanding captures what is happening with the *ramais* is 'ruralization' (see Gillen et al 2022). Our insights extend existing work in this field with our showcasing of the potential of the capabilities approach. Its particular understandings of wellbeing, freedom and agency are useful to understand motivations behind deurbanization (Piva da Silva et al., 2021) or ruralization (this paper). The study of de-urbanization and ruralization has tended to emphasize economic aspects of wellbeing (e.g. Chigbu 2015), and we find little engagement with capabilities in that literature.

Policy interventions to support the lives and livelihoods of colonists on the new forest frontiers we have described here are important because their struggles and voices can be undermined or coopted by more powerful actors (Bratman, 2011). Our case study captures a particular moment in the history of this frontier and it may be naive to assume that the colonists maintain their freedoms in the long term, without concerted action in terms of policies to foster the sustainable development of these settlements. There is precedent for the more innovative approach to policy which would be required here: Thaler et al. (2019) argue against a traditional top-down understanding of policy implementation. Rather than preconceived ideas being imposed vertically down onto a pliant and malleable reality (frontier governance), they argue that in practice, the policy process is much more iterative and multi-directional (a governance frontier) – what works in one context may be transferred to another and trigger a rethinking of approaches in Brasilia, the capital city. Incorporated in such a way into policy, novel informal settlements at the forest frontier, like those analyzed in this paper, could contribute models for sustainable development at new forest frontiers elsewhere in the majority world.

More research is needed to determine the extent to which urban–rural migration is occurring elsewhere in Amazonia, and the ways in which its characteristics may differ between regions and localities, and why. This would help support more targeted and specific policy interventions and provide validation to the present work. Furthermore, it is possible that the COVID-19 pandemic may have increased urban–rural migration, as urban lives become even more unfree owing to the effects of lockdowns, making more rural research on this topic even more important.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mariana Piva da Silva: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **James A. Fraser:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Luke Parry:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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.

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