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The former site of Tebunginako village, Abaiang Island, Kiribati. Coastal erosion and inundation threatened infrastructure and settlements along the lagoon shorelines of Tebunginako village, forcing the community to relocate to the ocean side of the atoll. (Photo: Karen McNamara)

## Environment and migration experts: Who are they, and what are their views?

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### Introduction

Research into environmental migration or, as the authors phrase it, “people movement in the context of environmental change” has focused on understanding the phenomenon itself. However, it is timely to take a less-travelled route and instead study the experts focusing on environmental migration. This brief reports on an online questionnaire of 262 such experts, situating

their perceptions of environmental migration within the policy development they help to drive, directly or indirectly. Such a study is important because policy does not develop solely on the basis of objective assessments of the world “out there”. Policy is also influenced by the knowledges, values, beliefs, assumptions, cultural contexts and activities of people involved in its

development. At a milestone moment when, after a long period of research and debate, environmental migration is being formalized on policy agendas, one can ask: What are the characteristics of experts? How do they define environmental migration, and what policies do they support? Knowing the answers to these questions can aid policy formation and, importantly, evaluation of policies and programmes addressing environmental migration, as well as self-evaluation and critical reflection among those involved.

## Concept definition

The authors devised the working concept “people movement in the context of environmental change” (or PMEC), which is defined as follows:

*People movement in the context of environmental change (PMEC) encompasses mobility, migration, displacement and/or resettlement linked to environmental change, including sudden-onset and slow-onset environmental changes, whether induced by natural hazards, climate change or some other form of human-induced or naturally occurring environmental degradation or change.*

The above definition of PMEC encompasses all types of environmental change-related people movements, not just migration but also, for instance, those that have been displaced or resettled.

## PMEC experts: Why study them?

Over the past decade, those interested in PMEC have evolved from a loose group of researchers and activists into an increasingly cohesive network of experts with a distinct identity, a policy community coming together in various institutional settings, such as the South American Network for Environmental Migration, the Asia-Pacific Migration and Environment Network and the United Kingdom’s Climate and Migration Coalition. Professionals in this area are becoming increasingly organized since the first coming together of around 400 international researchers, practitioners and professionals working on PMEC issues at the 2008 International Conference on Environmental Change, Forced Migration and Social Vulnerability in Bonn, Germany. At the end of 2016, the first-ever international scholarly association for the study of environmental migration was launched at the Hugo Conference: Environment, Migration, Politics in Belgium.

Furthermore, PMEC has arguably matured to the point of achieving policy recognition. PMEC is beginning to be addressed as a distinct issue, and is supported by (emerging) governance frameworks. Examples include: (a) regional consultations pursued as part of the Nansen Initiative between 2013 and 2015 (presently continuing as the Platform on Disaster Displacement) in preparation for its Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change; (b) the six-country Migration, Environment and



Flooding like this is common in many parts of the rural Philippines during typhoon season. Losing crops may prompt some rural people to migrate to bigger cities for short-term contracts. (Photo: Hedda Ransan-Cooper)



A resettlement village in Albay, Philippines. Resettlement, while increasingly common as a policy response to increasing environmental risks, is not among the top policy recommendations from PMEC experts. (Photo: Hedda Ransan-Cooper)

Climate Change: Evidence for Policy study funded by the European Union and administered by the International Organization for Migration in collaboration with six research centres; and (c) the Task Force on Displacement, created at the Paris Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in late 2015.

Emerging PMEC governance frameworks are shaped partly by the individual people who participate in research, debates and programme and policy development, as well as the institutions that support their work. Equally, however, the perceptions and concerns of individuals are not necessarily captured in policy. Here, policy is understood to be at an organizational scale, a set of processes, activities and actions rather than a single, discrete decision or document (Jones, 2011; Neilson, 2001). The perceptions and priorities of those involved in these efforts are crucially important because policy never develops solely on the basis of an objective assessment of the world “out there”. It is also influenced by the knowledge, values, assumptions and cultural contexts of participants in a policy arena (Daniell, 2014; Stehr and Grundmann, 2011). A variety of diverse actors help to define, directly or indirectly, the scope and content of PMEC-related policies. Therefore, the authors also conceive of “policy” broadly, because actors, such as journalists, academics, lobbyists, artists and activists can also stake a claim in policy issues, particularly at the issue-definition stage.

## Studying PMEC experts using an online questionnaire

The authors used an online questionnaire to gather qualitative and quantitative data about PMEC experts. Having the broad PMEC descriptor meant that the questionnaire targeted a wide range of people whose professional work, research of any kind or voluntary activities related to PMEC in some way. The aim of the questionnaire was to provide a global snapshot of these PMEC experts, including how they perceive and understand the issue of PMEC, the geographical and thematic focus of their work, and their views on optimal policy responses. The questionnaire also covered respondents’:

- Demographic characteristics (gender, age, country of origin and residence);
- Field of work, location of work, forums to present work, length of time working in this field and institutional affiliation;
- Views on the links between environmental change and people movement, including preferable terms to describe PMEC and influences on understanding; and
- Views on policies for averting or facilitating PMEC, and protecting those who engage in it.



A typical boarding house in Viet Nam where factory workers reside. This boarding house was one where a migrant household from the Mekong Delta was residing while working in a factory to earn money and recover from debt incurred from insufficient earnings from their salt-affected farmland. (Photo: Olivia Dun)

The questionnaire was available online for four weeks (18 January–15 February 2016). Invitations to participate were sent by e-mail to 595 potential respondents. Potential respondents were identified through systematic searches in academic and general online databases, and other largely Web-based sources. A combination of environmental change and people movement terms were used to identify respondents associated with online documented involvement in PMEC issues, generally a paper, report or website. A link to the online questionnaire was also placed on a number of network websites, e-mail lists and social media pages. 262 questionnaire responses were received in total (44% of potential respondents e-mailed).<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire was only distributed in English due to resource constraints. The authors were least successful in capturing respondents working on PMEC in security and military arenas, and climate/environment activists. The former may not be engaged with the same professional networks that would lead them to be aware of this questionnaire, which itself was more closely influenced by human security than national security ideas.

Previous research on “experts” in the PMEC field was conducted by Morinière and Hamza (2012:795) in 2009, which aimed to “delineate and dissect discourses that coexist at the interface of the environment and human mobility”. That study noted that debate was characterized by complexity, argued to be largely hindering policy development. Since then, however, policy development has moved forward significantly, indeed even despite explicitly recognizing the complexity associated with PMEC.

## Who are PMEC experts?

Table 1 provides a summary of the 262 respondents to the questionnaire. The mean age was 41 years, with an age range of 23–73 years.

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics of questionnaire respondents**

Variable	Description	%
Gender	Male	57
	Female	43
Region of residence	Europe	48
	North America	26
	Pacific/Oceania	12
	Asia	7
	Africa	5
	South America	2
Geographic focus of work	Asia	53
	Africa	49
	Pacific/Oceania	36
	Central and South America	25
	Europe	20
	Middle East	16
	North America	14
Length of time worked in the field of PMEC (Respondents could select more than one response)	1–4 years	38
	5–9 years	43
	Over 10 years	19
Institutional affiliation	Research institutions or university	72
	Non-governmental organization (NGO) sector	10
	Think tank	4
	Government	2
	News media	2
	Others	10

<sup>1</sup> While 262 respondents completed the questionnaire, some respondents chose not to answer all questions.

Respondents were given four options to consider when asked what they hoped to achieve through their work. Respondents could select any or all of the four responses: (a) promote on-the-ground action; (b) promote policy action; (c) raise public awareness of the issue; and (d) report news. A majority of respondents (81%) indicated that they hoped to promote policy action through their PMEC-related activities (mostly professional work), followed by raising public awareness of the issue (75%), promoting on-the-ground action (49%) and reporting news (15%). Providing only options for a yes/no response, the majority of respondents (89%) indicated that they are concerned about how PMEC is currently managed (or responded to), both globally and at a national scale.

## How do PMEC experts define and frame PMEC?

Respondents were asked to choose one term from a list of six (plus the category of “Others”) that they felt should be used to describe PMEC. The most preferred term was “migration” (38%), followed by “displacement” (20%), “mobility” (19%), “refugee” (7%), “relocation” (3%) and “resettlement” (1%). “Other” terms (e.g. victim, trapped population) were preferred by 11 per cent of the respondents.

The questionnaire also provided a series of statements to respondents capturing how they frame, or “make sense of” PMEC. Nine statements were provided that corresponded with common framings of PMEC as identified by Ransan-Cooper et al. (2015), i.e. victims, adaptable agents, security threats and political subjects. Two statements for each frame were provided, plus one other, which indicated PMEC are indistinguishable

from other migrants. Significantly, there was very little support for the framing of PMEC as a security threat. Eighty-five per cent of respondents completely disagreed that environmental migration required military solutions to protect sovereignty, and 57 per cent completely disagreed that PMEC is a threat to global, regional, national or subnational security. On the other hand, 92 per cent agreed that environmental migrants are in need of assistance and protection against environmental change effects.

## What do PMEC experts think about averting, facilitating and protecting those who move?

The authors examined PMEC experts’ understanding of how to best address PMEC, contextualizing responses with respondent characteristics, such as institutional affiliation and geographical focus of work. The questionnaire specifically asked respondents to consider (from a list of options) how “best” to avert, facilitate and protect those who move. The results from these questions are provided in Figures 1, 2 and 3.

Figure 1 summarizes respondents’ views on the types of policies or responses that were considered to be the two most helpful or relevant (from 10 possible responses) for **averting PMEC**. Just over 40 per cent of all respondents indicated that implementing risk reduction measures would be most helpful to avert PMEC. Improving development planning (29%) and preventing environmental push factors also ranked highly among favoured responses (26%). Increasing opportunities for remittances was considered to be the least likely option for averting movement (9.2%). There was little variation in the responses when compared with respondent characteristics.

**Figure 1: Respondents’ views on policy and response options for averting PMEC (n = 193)**

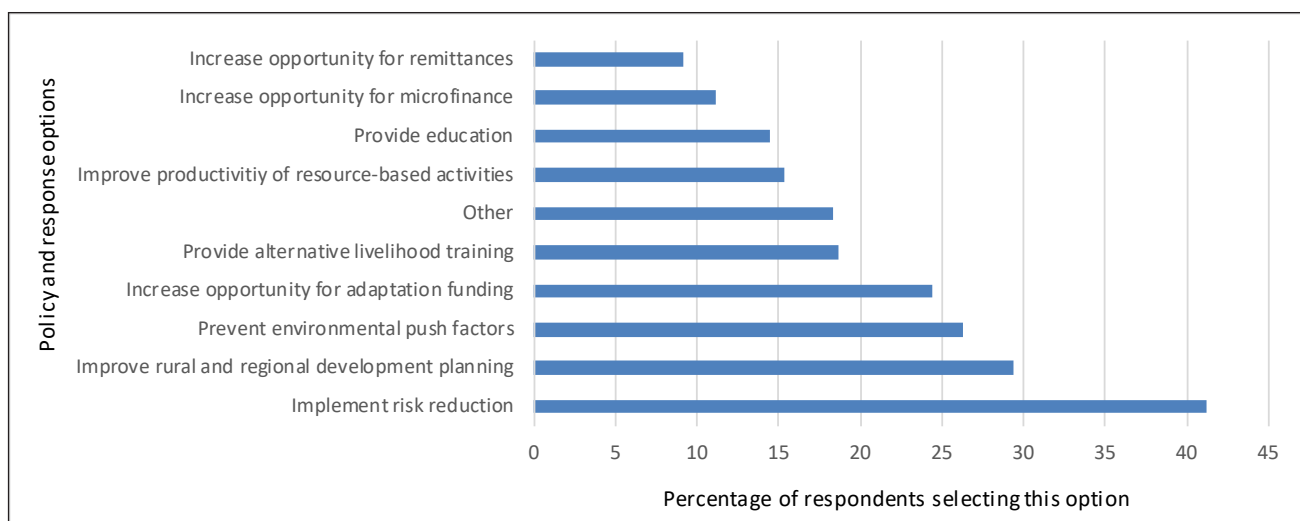


Figure 2 summarizes respondents' views on the types of policies or responses that were considered to be the two most helpful (from nine possible responses) with respect to **facilitating PMEC**. The most favoured policy option for facilitating PMEC overall was to increase labour migration opportunities (internal and cross border, 31%), closely followed by improved urban sustainability and planning (27%), and facilitating internal migration

in general (24%). When comparing response against respondent characteristics, some divergence emerged. When comparing against institutional affiliation, labour migration was favoured most strongly by those working in research, and those in all other sectors other than the NGO sector, which most strongly preferred increased opportunities for adaptation funding.

**Figure 2: Respondents' views on policy and response options for facilitating PMEC (n = 188)**

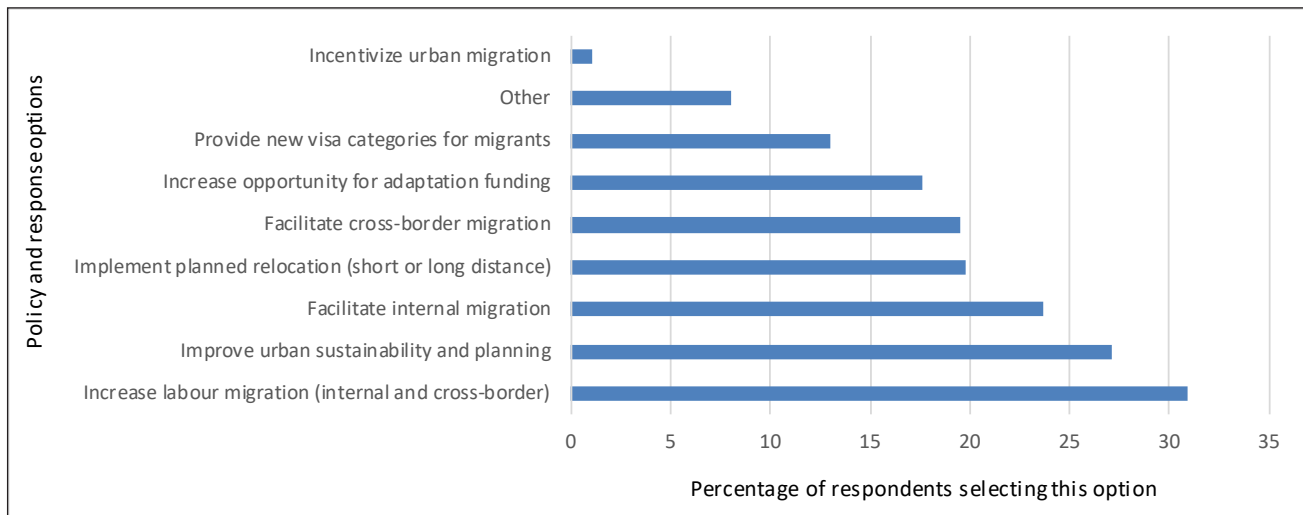
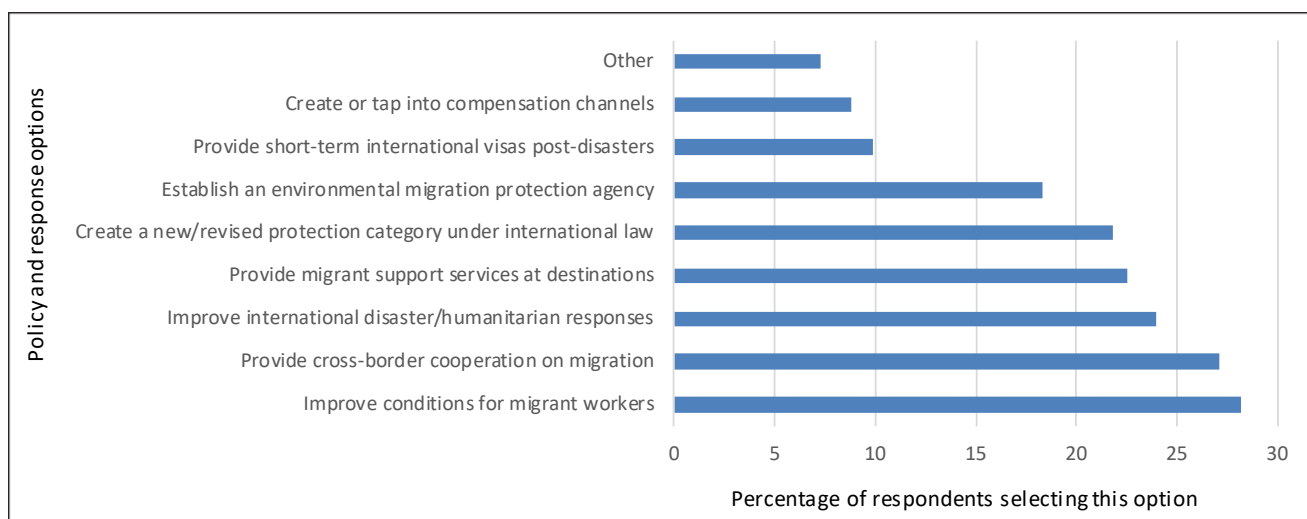


Figure 3 summarizes respondents' views on the types of policies or responses that were considered to be the two most helpful (from nine options) with respect to **protecting and supporting those engaged in PMEC**. In alignment with the above, the overall most favoured response related to migrant workers, in this case, improving conditions relating to their movement (28%). This was followed closely by providing cross-border cooperation on regional and international migration (27%), and improving international and disaster/humanitarian response (24%). Least favoured by respondents was creating or tapping into compensation channels (9%) or "other" options (7%).

When comparing responses against respondent demographics, such as institutional affiliation and geographical focus of work, some divergence emerged here, too. For instance, respondents from the NGO sector expressed a preference for establishing an environmental migration protection agency. Divergence was also evident when comparing against geographical focus of work, with respondents working in the Americas and the Middle East indicating a preference for creating a new/ revised protection category under international law.

**Figure 3: Respondents' views on policy and response options for protecting and supporting those engaged in PMEC (n = 189)**





Temporarily abandoned house belonging to a farming household in Ca Mau Province of the Mekong Delta, Viet Nam. This entire household moved to seek out factory work in urban parts of Viet Nam because they could no longer make sufficient income off their farm land due to the increased presence of salt water in the landscape. (Photo: Olivia Dun)

## Lessons learned and recommendations

Five prominent lessons have emerged from this study:

- (a) There was a marked difference between the location of the respondents surveyed and the geographic focus of their work. The former is dominated by professionals based in either Europe or North America, the latter by Asia, Africa and the Pacific/Oceania region, where there are high levels of climate risk. It is important to encourage reflexive engagement with what is a locational divide and potentially a cultural divide between those who study, enquire and shape policy, and those that are studied and governed.
- (b) Terminology to describe PMEC that was perceived to reduce agency of mobile people or advance particular political agendas such as “refugees” was largely rejected (only 7% of respondents considered the “refugee” term to be preferable to describe PMEC). Some respondents encouraged language that is more cognizant of human agency and human rights, such as “migration with dignity”. By far, the most preferred term used to describe PMEC was “migration” (38% of respondents), attributed in large part to it purportedly capturing all kinds of people movement, causal factors and relationships, and various time and spatial scales. The preferred framing of PMEC in terms of need of assistance and protection against environmental change suggests strong support for humanitarian policy approaches.
- (c) To support and protect those already on the move, the most important responses were to improve conditions for migrant workers and increase internal and cross-border labour migration opportunities. The emphasis on labour migration is of interest: resilience and adaptive capacity, chiefly at the individual level, were considered very important among respondents, emphasizing mobility as a positive phenomenon in a changing environment. However, the individualist and economic limitations of such an approach were also recognized. Humanitarian concerns, such as protecting human rights, maintaining dignity and preventing suffering were considered vital. Labour mobility policies thus need to be culturally and politically appropriate, in addition to being economically focused.

- (d) The policies recommended by experts cut across a range of policy areas; collaboration will be critical to achieving the policy outcomes recommended by experts. The policies raised by experts cut across development policy, urban planning, labour migration, social protection, humanitarian response, environment and resource management. This will require hitherto separate policy conversations to come together to develop contextually appropriate and sometimes, innovative, policies to avert, facilitate and protect PMEC.



Bhola Slum, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Located on a mere 1.65 acres, Bhola Slum was established in the 1970s as people fled the south of the country following the catastrophic 1970 East Pakistan Cyclone. In the decades following the cyclone, further residents from Bhola Island and other southern parts of the country have moved to Bhola Slum and many others in the country's capital often due to sea-level rise, flooding and erosion. (Photo: Karen McNamara)

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