



Setting reference levels for REDD+: some guidelines and principles

The Cancun agreement on REDD+ requires SBSTA to develop modalities for setting reference emissions levels and reference levels. The same principles apply to both. Many papers have been published on different ways of setting reference levels¹ for REDD+, and a number of papers have assessed the relative effectiveness of different methodological approaches, including several by CAN member organisations. Many of these studies find there is often little difference between the outcomes of different approaches, as long as they start with the same guidelines and principles. In this paper CAN therefore sets out some guidelines and principles that should be followed in setting reference levels.

Most studies have focussed on how to set reference levels for reducing emissions from deforestation and on how to ensure the conservation of carbon stocks in countries with high forest cover and low deforestation (HFLD). Here, we therefore focus on these subject areas but similar basic principles would apply to degradation and to the enhancement of forest carbon stocks.

The Cancun Accord establishes COP 17 as the deadline for SBSTA recommendations on reference levels. This deadline should be met in order to achieve the maximum effectiveness of REDD+ and inform capacity building efforts which should aim to be coherent with future COP guidance on reference levels.

In the following discussion, the term “national historical baselines” refers to the observed average deforestation rate of a country over a set period of time. “Reference level” is defined as the benchmark for assessing a country’s performance in reducing emissions. This can be used to determine allocation of international funds.

¹ In order to avoid confusion, in this paper the term “reference levels” applies to both “reference emissions levels” and “reference levels” from paragraph 71b of the Cancun Agreement (1CP.15).

Contribute to the mitigation of climate change

REDD+ should permanently reduce emissions, increase removals and conserve carbon stocks (thereby avoiding emissions). Reference levels should be set within this framework, in accordance with the goal agreed in the Cancun Agreement.² Reference levels must be set such that confidence is maintained in the system, global REDD+ goals are achieved, and inclusion of REDD+ contributes to the overall level of ambition of emission reduction commitments.

Historical emissions as the foundation for national baselines

Basing reference levels on national historical emissions should be the basic starting point for establishing reference levels. Historical emissions, averaged over time, can be established in a consistent and transparent way for all countries. Furthermore, basing reference levels on historical emissions can help REDD+ achieve its goal of slowing and halting emissions from forests. It is also consistent with previous UNFCCC decisions, including, the indicative guidance for demonstration activities in Decision 2/CP.13³ and the REDD+ methodological guidance in 4/CP.15⁴.

Given significant interannual variability in deforestation in many countries, historical baselines should reflect recent averages and trends, rather than a single base year.

Encourage maximum participation

Broad participation in REDD+ is required to maximise its mitigation potential and minimise international leakage. This is also consistent with the second paragraph of the Cancun agreement on REDD+.⁵ Participation by countries with high carbon stocks and low deforestation rates is especially important in order to ensure that those stocks are not lost to the atmosphere.

² “... in the context of the provision of adequate and predictable support to developing country Parties, Parties should collectively aim to slow, halt and reverse forest cover and carbon loss, according to national circumstances, consistent with the ultimate objective of the Convention, as stated in Article 2”.

³ 6. Reductions in emissions or increases resulting from the demonstration activity should be based on historical emissions, taking into account national circumstances.

⁴ 7. Recognizes that developing country Parties in establishing forest reference emission levels and forest reference levels should do so transparently taking into account historic data, and adjust for national circumstances, in accordance with relevant decisions of the Conference of the Parties.

⁵ Also affirming the need to promote broad country participation in all phases described in paragraph 73 below, including through the provision of support that takes into account existing capacities. (ICP.15)

Ensure consistency

Modalities for setting reference levels should be common for all countries.

Be fully transparent and independently reviewed

The UNFCCC must encourage consistency and require disclosure and transparency behind the reference levels approach for all participants. Values, calculations, and assumptions for developing reference levels should be should be freely and openly posted online, with sufficient time for comment, before reference levels and reference emissions levels are accepted by the COP. Furthermore, these methodologies, values, calculations and assumptions should be independently reviewed against these guidelines and for data quality before they are accepted by the COP.