Questions and Answers on REDD+ RELs/RLs

1. What is a forest reference level/reference emission level?

A REDD+ forest reference level/reference emission level (FREL/FRL) is a benchmark for assessing a country's performance in implementing REDD+ activities. It is expressed in CO_2 equivalents per year, and has a pre-determined timeframe over which it is applied.[1] A REL/RL is either established at the national level or is elaborated at the subnational scale, representing less than the country's entire national territory of forest area, in an interim period. It may reflect one or more of the five REDD+ activities, as long as the activities that are significant, are reflected.

The distinction between the terms FRL (Forest Reference Level) and FREL (Forest Reference Emission Level) is not defined under the UNFCCC and not applied consistently in the literature. REL commonly refers to emissions from gross deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) in a given time period while RL refers to net emissions and removals, in the case that the other REDD+ activities (comprising the "+") have also been included in the scope.

2. What are the key technical elements of a FREL/FRL?

There are several key technical elements, decision points or design features that need to be considered when establishing a FREL/FRL for REDD+. These are forest definition, scope of activities, carbon pools included, scale (national or sub-national), data and methodologies used, time period, and use of adjustments.

Forest definition: A forest definition typically includes minimum thresholds for crown area, tree height and land area, however different definitions of forest can exist and this is a country-determined decision. According to the REDD+ FREL/FRL guidance agreed in Durban, the definition of forest used in the construction of the FREL/FRL will need to be provided in the reference level submission. If there is any difference between that definition and the one applied by the country in its national greenhouse gas inventory or in reporting to other international organizations (i.e., FAO FRA), then an explanation of why and how the definitions used are different will need to be provided.

Scope:

- *Activities:* A REL/RL may reflect one or more of the five REDD+ activities, with all significant activities included in the scope.
- *Carbon pools:* There are 5 IPCC forest C pools: aboveground biomass, belowground biomass, deadwood, litter and soil. According to the UNFCCC Durban decision on FREL/FRLs, significant pools and gases should not be excluded from the construction of a FRL and parties should give reasons for omitting any pool or gas.

Scale: A FREL/FRL may be established at a subnational or national scale. If elaborated at a subnational scale, covering less than the entire national territory of forest area, this is to be an interim measure only, while transitioning to a national FREL/FRL.

[1] UNFCCC decisions 12/CP.17 and 13/CP.19 have been used as the main references for the responses included throughout this note.

Data and Methodologies: The Durban guidelines for REDD+ FREL/FRL submissions make it clear that the data, methodologies and procedures used in the construction of the FREL/FRL should be guided by the most recent IPCC guidance and guidelines, as adopted or encouraged by the COP. Given IPCC methods, both activity data as well as emission factors will be needed to estimate the forest-related emissions by sources and/or removals by sinks. All data and information used to estimate CO_2 equivalents per year over the selected time period will need to be consistent with that used to estimate the forest-related emissions by sources and removals by sinks, for the purpose of Measurement, Reporting and Verifying (MRV).

Time period: A historical reference period will need to be chosen. This is the span of time during which emissions taking place in the past will be estimated. This time period will likely be based on a combination of factors including data availability and the relevance of the past as a predictor of the future.

Adjustments: (see detailed Q&A below)

3. Is a country "locked in" once it submits a FREL/FRL to the UNFCCC?

Given the relevant decisions on REDD+ FREL/FRLs under the UNFCCC, it is clear that a country would **not** be "locked in" to a FREL/FRL. Decision 12/CP.17 recognizes the need to update FREL/FRLs periodically in order to reflect new knowledge, trends, and any modification of scope and/or methodologies and allows this. Moreover, the technical assessment process under the UNFCCC is designed to function as an iterative, learning-by-doing process. During the assessment process, a Party has the opportunity to submit a revised FREL/FRL based on early inputs received by the REL assessment team.

4. How are adjustments to an FREL/FRL defined? What should be considered a reasonable scope or options for such adjustments? How can national circumstances be taken into account as part of adjustments?

While for some national contexts, it may be most appropriate to set the FRL/FREL based on historic deforestation rate, for other REDD+ countries it may likely require an adjustment from the historic rate to more accurately reflect the "business-as-usual" case. The scope of eligible adjustments is not defined in the UNFCCC decisions. There are no specific guidelines for countries to follow in order to account for national circumstances, if they opt to do so. Generally, the UNFCCC guidance only makes it clear that adjustments should be justifiable and transparent. Though the definition or types of sufficient justification are not specified, it can be assumed that this will require reasonable proof, particularly third party assessment of likely forest impacts.

Despite the lack of specific guidance, countries can look to the scope of national circumstances considered in National Communications reporting as one input into determination of which circumstances may be relevant in the context of setting a REDD+ FREL/FRL. In their National Communication reports, Non-Annex I Parties should provide a description of their national and regional development priorities, objectives and circumstances, on the basis of which they will address climate change and its adverse impacts. This description may include information on features of their geography, climate and economy as well as information regarding their specific needs and concerns arising from the adverse effects of climate change and/or the impact of the implementation of response measures. Specific circumstances that may be relevant to the future rate of forest emissions include drivers of deforestation and degradation, stage in forest transition, development plans and policies, and expected population changes.

A particular policy, programme or plan may be considered for adjusting the FREL/FRL if it can be clearly justified how that policy will impact deforestation rates and, therefore, forest emissions. If national policies or programmes are used to justify an upward adjustment to the FREL/FRL, reasonable proof that

these will indeed impact emissions will need to be provided. The strongest evidence would probably be in the form of third-party assessments that indicate likelihood of implementation, as well as likely impacts of the programmes and projects on forest emissions. Evidence should cover both the potential for a given impact actually being realized as well as the relevant time frame for that impact. This is particularly important for any type of development plan used as an input into a BAU projection, as many plans are never actually implemented due to fiscal constraints or other circumstances.

5. How should a REDD+ FREL/FRL and national REDD+ strategy be linked/considered alongside each other?

The national REDD+ strategy / action plan and FREL/FRL are two of the four 'design' elements of REDD+; the other two being the National Forest Monitoring System (NFMS – which includes the Measurement, Reporting and Verification element) and the Safeguards Information System (SIS). The FREL/FRL, NFMS and SIS can be considered as the key elements (but not the only ones, e.g. drivers of deforestation, multiple benefits, etc) that inform the development and eventual adoption of a national REDD+ strategy / action plan. As a country gains more REDD+ implementation experience through a learning by doing process, the national REDD+ strategy may be updated as new information becomes available through the FREL/FRL, NFMS and SIS.

The FREL/FRL can be regarded as a benchmark by which the implementation and success of policies and measures laid out in a national strategy/action plan can be evaluated.

6. What are the initial data analysis steps involved with REL development?

The initial data analysis steps involved with the development of a national and/or subnational FREL/FRL are to collect the following information:

- Agree forest definition
- Assess historical land-use changes (time to be decided by country but probably no less than 10 years of historical data should be considered, the more a country can go back in time the better)
- Land use change data (activity data)
- Forest carbon stock data (emission factor data)
- Information on national circumstances, including the drivers of deforestation. The assessment of national circumstances is already a reporting requirement for all UNFCCC parties, to be presented in a specific chapter in the National Communication. However, there are currently no clear guidelines for the assessment and compilation of national circumstances and each country is free to assess these following autonomous methodological approaches. Pending further guidance from the UNFCCC, and based on existing guidance, the assessment of national circumstances could consider any information potentially relevant for a REDD+ REL/RL that might be included in the scope of national circumstances contained in National Communications (UNFCCC 2003[2]):
    - geographical characteristics (climate, forest area, land use, other environmental characteristics);
    - population (growth rates, distribution, density, etc.);
    - economy (energy, transport, industry, mining, tourism, agriculture, fisheries, waste, health, services);
    - education (including scientific and technical research institutions);

[2] United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) 2003 Reporting on climate change: User manual for the guidelines on national communications from non-Annex I parties.http://unfccc.int/resource/docs/publications/userman_nainc_en.pdf

- any other information considered relevant by the party (e.g. information relating to Articles 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10 of the UNFCCC).

The above steps should be carried out in a way to ensure consistency between the development of an FREL/FRL and MRV. The UNFCCC allows for a step-wise approach to FREL/FRL (see point 9 below). This implies that countries are encouraged to develop and submit FREL/FRL once they feel they have 'adequate' data and information to do so. The intention of the ICA process under the UNFCCC is to support countries to improve their FREL/FRL. This means that a FREL/FRL can be simple and improved over time.

7. Though each country is unique, what is a reasonable, approximate timeframe to have a draft REL ready to submit to the UNFCCC? Can this be a feasible output of a UN-REDD National Programme?

No timeframe can be placed on a given country having a draft FREL/FRL ready to submit to the UNFCCC, as this depends on a variety of elements in the country and the political engagement on the national level. Furthermore, countries engage in REDD+ readiness with different levels of capacity, making it more difficult to place a timeframe on when they could be ready to develop a draft FREL/FRL. On the other hand, the guidance for the development and review of FREL/FRLs under the UNFCCC can be considered as 'complete' since COP19. This makes it easier for countries to know how they should approach the matter and to think about setting a time frame for the development of a draft FREL/FRL. This was challenging until now as there was no clarity yet under the UNFCCC of what was expected of countries in terms of FREL/FRL and how the review process would be dealt with. Hence, the country in question and the UN-REDD Programme should evaluate together on a case by case basis whether or not is feasible and desirable for a country to have a draft FREL/FRL as an output of a NP.

8. What is our interpretation of a "Stepwise REL/RL"?

Decision 12/CP.17 provides 'modalities' for forest RELs/RLs supported by an Annex on 'Guidelines for submissions of information on forest reference levels'. The decision agrees that a stepwise approach to national forest RELs/RLs may be useful as it would allow countries to improve their forest RELs/RLs over time. Countries should update their forest RELs/RLs periodically to reflect new knowledge, new trends and any modification of scope and methodologies. Importantly, the decision acknowledges that subnational forest RELs/RLs maybe elaborated as an interim measure, covering less than the entire national territory, while transitioning to a national forest REL/RL. Such an approach provides parties with a starting point from which they can improve over time by incorporating better data, improved methodologies and additional activities, pools, and GHG gases, as part of their capacity development for REDD+ readiness.

A step-wise approach to developing FREL/FRL is also linked with determining the scope and REDD+ activities, and can hence be considered to be an 'iterative process'. Brazil's recent submission of its FREL provides a concrete example of an iterative and step-wise approach, particularly in terms of scope of the REL. Section 2c of the submission states the following: "*The forest reference level proposed by Brazil in this submission includes only the activity 'Reducing Emissions from Deforestation' in the Amazonia biome […]."* It then goes on to explain some of the data it is collecting in terms of forest degradation through a system known as DEGRAD. Subsequently, the submission states the following: *"It is expected that this understanding [degradation process] improves with time, as new data becomes available, allowing for the future submission of a FREL for degradation"*.