1. What are the session key findings? What are the new Lesson(s) learned / Scientific progress (since AR5 release, if relevant)?

The session started by discussing the REDD+ Framework agreed in Warsaw in 2013 and finalized in June 2015 during the latest SBSTA session in Bonn. Key decisions on REDD+ were finalized in the SBSTA meeting allowing for the effective implementation of REDD+. These decisions are expected to guarantee transparency and accountability of the overall framework. The framework as a whole is meant to have a strong degree of normative force. Even though the fulfilment of the criteria can be done on a voluntary basis, it becomes mandatory if a country wants to receive results-based finance. (Christina Voigt, University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway)

Despite the fact that there is a clear framework for REDD+ implementation, there are barriers to success, since in many countries, a transformational change needs to occur in policies, discourses, power relations and actions before REDD+ can be effectively implemented. Typically policies are inflexible, slow to move and processes are difficult to influence. This is holding back REDD+ implementation. (Maria Brockhaus, CIFOR, Indonesia)

To access results based finance available through REDD+, countries must provide information according to the guidelines outlined in the Warsaw Framework. The methods are robust and aim to ensure that results are reliable. (Voigt) But numbers can be misleading, since they can be cherry picked, misused, and manipulated by those who are powerful enough to hold them, and used for their own agenda. (Maria Brockhaus, Arild Angelsen)

One example of numbers holding the power for REDD+ effective and equitable implementation is reference levels. Currently six countries have submitted their reference levels to UNFCCC, which determine the level of carbon payments that potentially can be obtained from a REDD+ mechanism. There is room for flexibility in setting the reference level, for example, what activities to include (i.e. degradation), the historical period for estimating expected future emissions, and adjustments of historical levels due to national circumstances. This flexibility may give incentives to establish high reference levels, which yield higher estimated emission reductions and potentially higher payments. For example, hypothetically changing the historical reference period leads to a potential 1bn USD/yr difference in payments for Brazil under a 5$/tCO2 assumption, highlighting the power of numbers.

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1 The now complete UNFCCC methodological framework for REDD+ consists of the Warsaw REDD+ Framework adopted in 2013 together with draft decisions at the UNFCCC’s 42nd SBSTA meeting June 2015 in Bonn
The need for a strong and independent assessment of reference levels is evident but currently not in place (Arild Angelsen - Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway and CIFOR).

One of the potential co-benefits of REDD+ is to protect and enhance the income and wellbeing of stakeholders. An extensive survey investigating the impact of 23 REDD+ subnational initiatives in six countries showed that wellbeing and income have both negative and positive changes over time, and it remains unclear where and if changes are linked to REDD+ engagement. However, there is still potential for future benefits to occur, since most initiatives have not advanced as rapidly as planned and most are not accessing money from carbon markets (Claudio De Sassi, CIFOR, Indonesia).

Estimating the cost of increasing carbon in landscapes is challenging, however is necessary to understand the viability of interventions. One solution is interviewing local experts to provide estimates of potential carbon savings from activities, and this has been demonstrated using the tool CarboScen, which provides a framework for data collection. It also provides the potential to explore carbon prices, and assess scenarios which can aid decision making on REDD+ implementation (Markku Larjavaara, University of Helsinki, Finland).

2. What are the major knowledge gaps and research needs identified in the session?

Further research is required to understand the ability of REDD+ projects to provide co-benefits over time.

The impact of other large economic issues such as international trade on deforestation and forest degradation needs further research. Current policy proposals only set small targets and do not look at the big picture.

The sufficiency of safeguards that have been agreed on under REDD+ needs to be assessed in order to guarantee the wellbeing of populations. The sufficiency of Safeguard Information Systems to provide information to judge safeguard achievements comprehensively needs to be monitored and assessed.

Emission estimates – in particular future emissions without any REDD+ interventions (i.e. reference levels) – need to be assessed independently.

3. Did the session discuss/identify promising approaches in the fields of Adaptation and Mitigation, or both?

N/A.

4. Are there take-home messages from the session?

(When relevant, please specify targeted group of stakeholders. For example, policy-makers / COP21 negotiators, practitioners (experts, etc.), NGOs, private sector, citizens, media, etc.)

While a framework for REDD+ had not been concluded, progress in implementation has been slower than expected. Support to overcome barriers in institutions, governance and policies must be provided to increase access to carbon payments for REDD+ initiatives.
Numbers are a key part of REDD+, which is so far the only agreed results-based finance mechanism in the UNFCCC, and must therefore be used responsibly, and objectively. There is a need for a review process and independent scrutiny of numbers (e.g. reference levels), especially since these numbers are supposed to determine carbon payments. The importance of state regulated action within the countries where REDD+ initiatives are applied was stressed as a key issue during this session. Transformational change needs to be driven by domestic policies.

5. Are there Important Quotes from the session?

“The time has come for effective implementation of REDD+, after all MRV processes and result-based finance are means to end only. The end is slowing, halting and reversing forest cover loss as part of the global effort against climate change. This needs to happen now, until 2020 and in the framework of the Paris agreement for 2020 and onwards”. Christina Voigt (University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway)

“Transformational change is required from a current business as usual scenario of high levels of deforestation and forest degradation, policy sectors beyond the forestry sector need to work on this transformational change”. Maria Brockhaus (CIFOR)

“Understanding power and power imbalances within the numbers and information in the REDD+ policy arenas across all levels and scales is crucial for managing risks and trade-offs throughout the REDD+ policy process - from agenda setting to implementation and evaluation of the implementation of set objectives”. Maria Brockhaus (CIFOR)

“An independent assessment process of reference level submitted by countries is so far not in place. We can hope for open debate on the fact that some of the submissions are questionable”. Arild Angelsen (Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway and CIFOR)

“We should not be naïve about numbers, they are usually part of a political process and they are often cherry picked. REDD+ numbers, as within any system, can encounter manipulation. In the case of REDD+, the success in terms of reduced emissions is the actual emissions minus a reference level over a certain period. The reference level could be picked by a country to make it look good, and to achieve higher payments.” Arild Angelsen (Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Norway and CIFOR)

“REDD+ initiatives on the ground are much more diverse than the original REDD+ concept; there is a need to really define what is REDD+ in order to place attribution. Claudio de Sassi (CIFOR, Indonesia)

“In our study sites, REDD+ impact on community income and wellbeing is very contained, and much smaller than the impact of other factors playing out over the time of our study. It remains untested how the lack of non-carbon benefits relates to emission reductions”. Claudio de Sassi (CIFOR, Indonesia)

6. Please include any other remark that you might have.