![biovision logo]

AGROECOLOGY CRITERIA TOOL
USER GUIDE

The Agroecology Criteria Tool (ACT) enables users to analyse to what degree agricultural programs, projects, and policies support agroecological transitions. The tool has been applied in a range of initiatives including donor portfolios, agricultural policy and strategy, research and extension programs, and development projects.

How does ACT work?

ACT contains 62 criteria reflecting activities which support agroecological change on farms and in wider food systems. The criteria are presented in a framework that integrates the FAO's 10+ elements of agroecology within the 5 levels of food system change proposed by Gliessman (see below). Each criterion contains a description and examples of activities they relate to.

5 LEVELS OF FOOD SYSTEM CHANGE AND 10+ ELEMENTS OF AGROECOLOGY
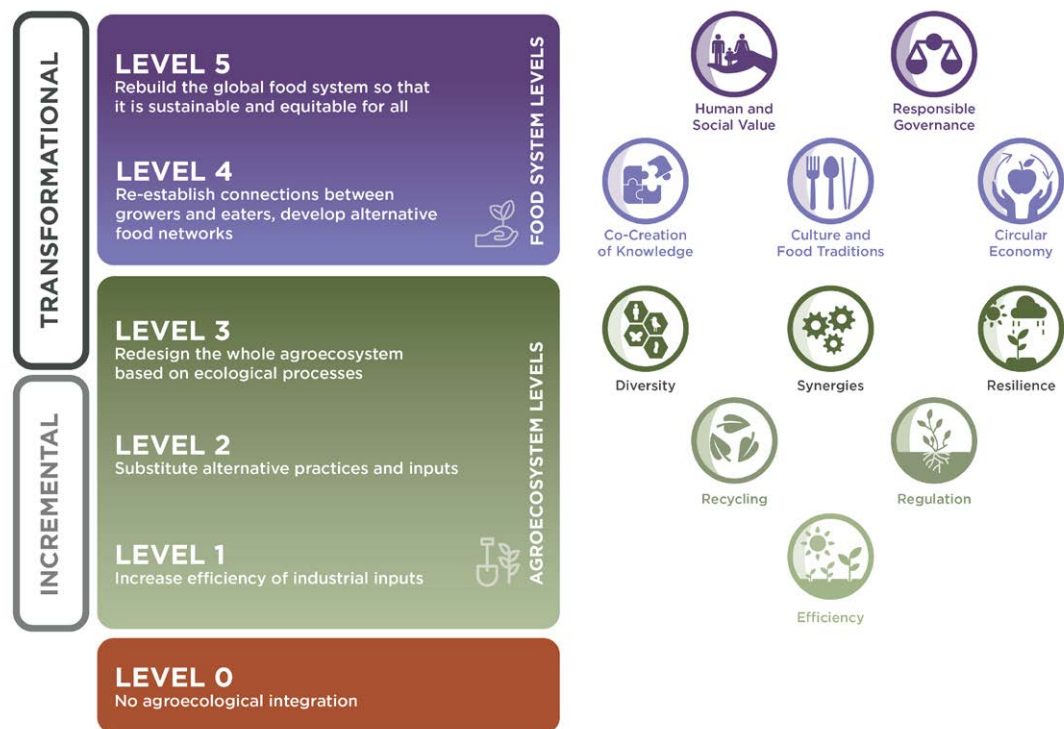
Users can select whether criteria are met by an initiative's current or planned activity. After assessing all criteria ACT generates a visual representation of the results (see example in page 2).

Level 1: Increase efficiency
Level 2: More sustainable alternatives
Level 3: Redesign the agroecosystems
Level 4: Producer-Consumer links
Level 5: New global food system

How can ACT be used?

ACT is available as an online tool and downloadable excel file. The excel version allows multiple initiatives to be compared and allows for user adaptation.

As a monitoring and evaluation tool, ACT can be used to identify to what extent an initiative is supporting various dimensions of agroecological change. Beyond identifying activities, the tool highlights which levels of food system transformation the initiative is engaged with and can be used to identify areas for future development. ACT can be used internally by organisations to assess their initiatives or by external stakeholders, for example to compare different initiatives or to increase transparency and provide recommendations for change. Likewise, it can be used to assess whether an initiative's original objectives are aligned with the activities it delivers.

ACT can also be used as a design tool to ensure new initiatives engage with relevant agroecological elements. Using ACT in this way enables accountability and can be used as a baseline to determine to what extent an initiative is supporting agroecological transitions, and to ensure this term is not co-opted.

How can results from ACT be interpreted?

Agroecological transitions can be initiated at multiple entry points, whether at the farm, landscape, market, or policy levels. The 5 levels of food system framework should be used to locate activities rather than as a pathway for change from 1 to 5. Nonetheless, for initiatives focused on the farm-level to be identified as agroecological, they must engage with level 3 change. Engagement solely with level 1 and/or 2 indicates initiative engaged with incremental change rather than agroecological transformation. Likewise, initiatives engaged with level 4 and/or 5 may be identified as 'social enablers', and as 'systemic' if engagement with level 3 is also apparent. For more detail on these definitions please see the **'Money Flows' report** (Biovision & IPES Food, 2020, p. 76).

The visualisation of results provided by ACT differs depending on whether you are assessing a single or multiple initiatives. Results for single initiatives are displayed in a radar chart which describes the degree to which an agroecological element is supported as a percentage (see example on the left). When analysing multiple initiatives, a different radar chart is generated which indicates the total number of initiatives engaged with a particular element, rather than comparing the extent of support each initiatives provides. Deeper analysis of multiple initiatives can be achieved by comparing the individual results of each initiative.
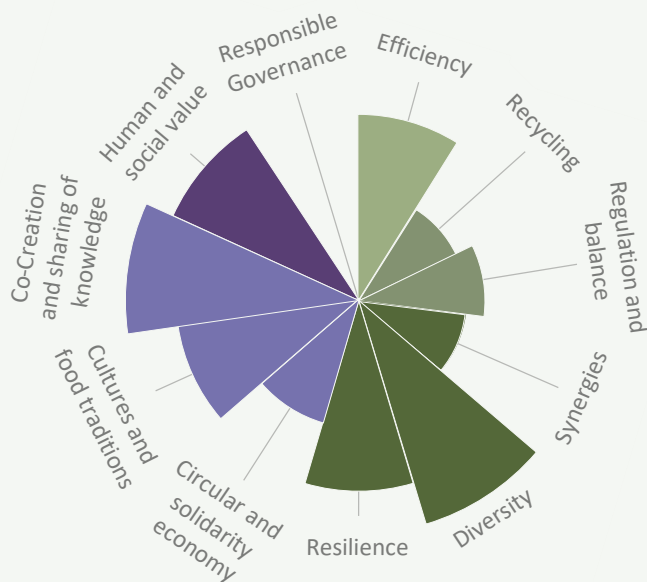
The results produced by ACT are context specific. Rather than aiming at a universal goal, or full scores, ACT is best used to assess an initiative within the context of what is both feasible and desirable. This is important given the inherent trade-offs that agroecology entails. For example, cover crops can be used for soil conservation, as green manures, as livestock feed, or for compost production. Depending on the objectives on an initiative, it may not be feasible, nor desirable, to meet criteria for all of these uses of cover crops.

Comparisons between multiple initiatives must reflect the contexts in which they exist. For example, in contexts where food systems are already localized it is unlikely that activities related to 're-localising' food systems are to be found. It would therefore be inappropriate to compare such an initiative with another operating in a context where strengthening local food webs is a priority. Geographic or other boundaries may therefore be useful.

Limitations of ACT

ACT does not evaluate outcomes or impacts of activities. It is recommended that a mixed methods approach is utilized if such results are desired.

Criteria selection is binary (yes/no) and therefore does not indicate quality or diversity of agroecological activities. This means that positive results do not exclude possibility for further development. Likewise, when comparing multiple initiatives users must rely on any notes that have been entered in the tool to distinguish the nuances of how each initiative engages with criteria. For example, an initiative that funds agroforestry tree planting will be 'scored' equal to an initiative that coordinates landscape integration of agroforestry projects.

Criteria inclusion may be affected by user subjectivity. It is recommended that analyses are internally and externally reviewed to minimise biases. Likewise, it is recommended to justify how particular definitions or concepts are used. Additionally, data gaps should be filled via interviews to confirm absent criteria.

Practical steps for data input

Before using ACT you will need to select a suitable object for analysis. You may wish to analyse digital or printed materials (e.g. policy documents or investment portfolios) or interview key stake-holders about an organisation or project. Whichever object you select, the methods for entering data into the online or excel version of ACT remain the same as follows.

Online tool

1. Enter the name of the initiative you are analysing.

2. Move through the tool, selecting the criteria the initiative fulfils by clicking the slider icons.

3. Results will be automatically generated in a radar chart as you move through the tool. You can view and download the results once you are completed.

References

Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development & IPES-Food (2020). Money Flows: What is holding back investment in agroecological research for Africa? Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development & International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems

FAO (2018). The 10 elements of Agroecology: Guiding the Transition to sustainable food and agricultural systems. Rome, Italy.

Gliessman, S.R. (2015). Agroecology: The Ecology of Sustainable Food Systems, 3rd ed. CRC. Taylor & Francis Group, Boca Raton, FL

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Excel Tool

1. Open the 'Criteria per level' sheet.

2. Enter the name of the intervention you are analysing in cell E1.

3. To record where an intervention meets a criterion type the number 1 into the column labelled 'indicator present (0/1)'. Write any specific notes in the next column, for example to provide detail about how the criteria is met.

4. Results will be automatically generated in a radar chart on the 'Results' sheet as you move through the tool.
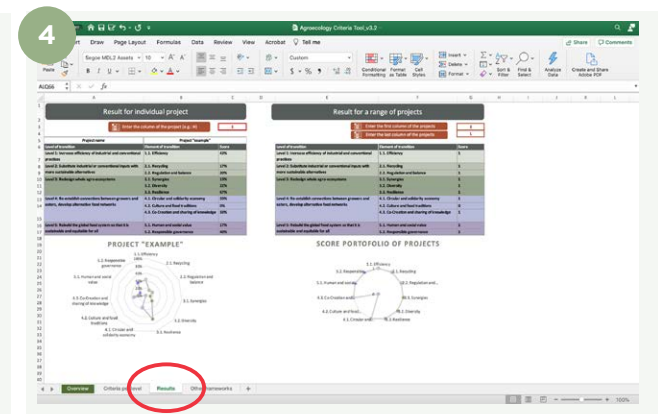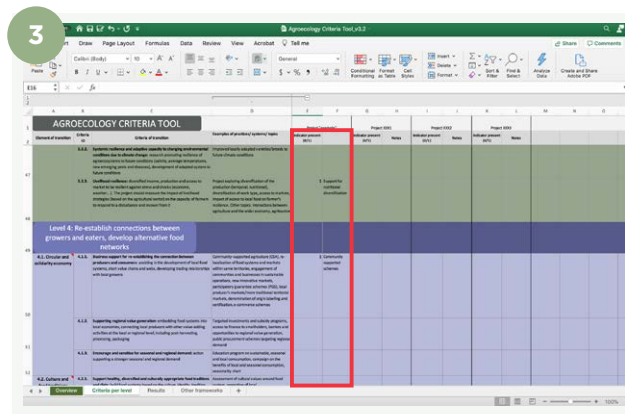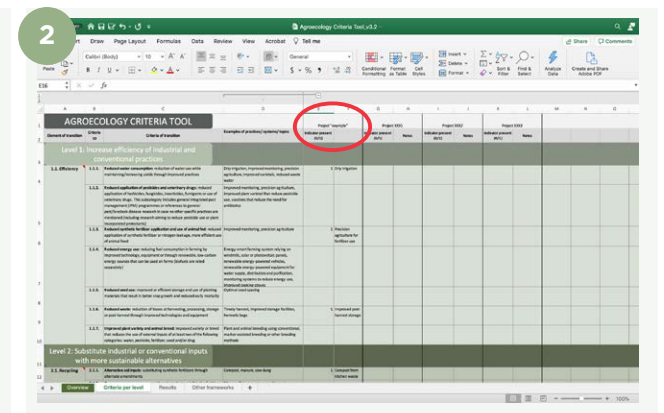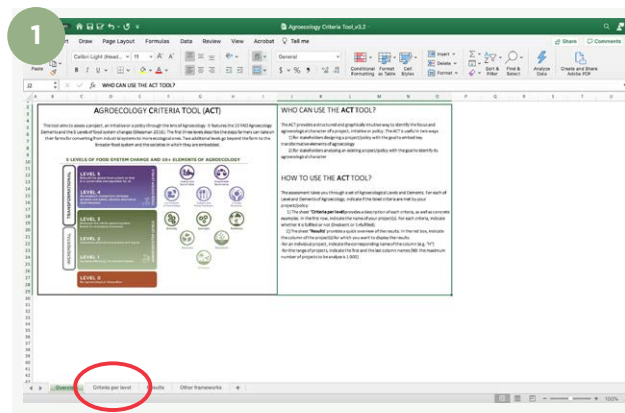
Note: to analyse multiple initiatives, simply follow steps 1-4 in the excel tool, ensuring you add new initiatives to new columns to the right of the first initiative.