

# Towards sustainable food systems – Introducing the transformative approach of agroecology



## EXERCISE BOOK

## IMPRINT

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Registered offices  
Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Rural Development and Agriculture Division G500  
Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 32+36  
53113 Bonn, Germany  
T +49 (0) 228 44 60 – 0  
F +49 (0) 228 44 60 – 17 66


E [svle@giz.de](mailto:svle@giz.de)  
I [www.giz.de/en](http://www.giz.de/en)

**Authors:**  
Sector Project Rural Development (SV LE): Dorothee Baum (GIZ), Elena Zoe Nicoletti (GIZ);  
Isabell Renner (external consultant), Birgit Kundermann (external consultant)

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# 1.

## INTRODUCTION TO THE TRAINING

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Securing the food supply for a growing world population, maintaining healthy and productive ecosystems, reducing climate risks and lowering greenhouse gas emissions are some of the defining traits of sustainable land and food systems.

In view of increasingly complex social, ecological and economic challenges, agroecology – as an interplay of scientific discipline, agricultural practice and socio-political movement – has evolved as an important school of thought in the scientific and political debate. Moreover, there are already abundant tried and tested solutions and a broad pool of experience derived from practical implementation. As a result, agroecology – if implemented appropriately – has great potential to foster a socio-ecological transformation of land and food systems.

From the perspective of the international commitments, agroecology offers significant contributions to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations, the Paris Agreement the post-2020 agenda of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD). In order to fully exploit this potential, stakeholders in planning, policy and practice need a solid understanding of what agroecology is about and a guided reflection on the options, possibilities and challenges of the agroecological transformation pathways ahead.

### Objectives

Overall, the training aims to contribute to:

- The mainstreaming of the concept of agroecology into projects and programmes related to agriculture, rural development and food systems, and
- The agroecological transformation of global food systems.

This course is designed as an introductory training to agroecology. Its specific (learning) objectives are:

- Develop a basic understanding of the theoretical foundations of agroecology (concepts and principles),
- Get an overview of the current debates on agroecology and sustainable food systems,

- Become familiar with methods and tools for reflecting on the agroecological character of a project or policy,
- Identify potential entry points for integrating agroecological approaches into one's own work environment,
- Be better prepared to engage in discussions about concepts of agroecology with partners and other stakeholders, and
- Extend one's network of stakeholders interested in agroecology and connect with the GIZ community on agroecology.



# 2.

## SESSION A: INTRODUCTION TO AGROECOLOGY

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### Exercise: Definitions

Over the years, the term agroecology has been adopted by a multitude of actors across the world. Different stakeholders emphasise different aspects of the concept, understanding varies from a science, a practice, a movement, or a combination of all three.



#### YOUR TASK:

Have a look at the different explanations on agroecology and discuss with your peers which one you prefer and why.

After the group work, be prepared to share the results of your discussion orally in plenary.



#### TIME:

approx. 15 minutes

#### Agroecology....

1. ... is an approach to agriculture that views agricultural areas as ecosystems and is concerned with the ecological impact of agricultural practices.
2. ... is based on people-led-processes of transition towards self-reliant, resilient and sustainable farming and food systems. The approaches to achieving this transition spring from local contexts and are bottom-up and holistic, and contribute to empowerment, food sovereignty and the right to food.
3. ... is an integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of food and agricultural systems. It seeks to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while taking into consideration the social aspects that need to be addressed for a sustainable and fair food system.
4. ... is the study of the relation of agricultural crops and environment.
5. ... encompasses a set of principles and techniques to enhance the sustainability of a farming system, a movement that seeks a new way to food production, and a science that looks at ways of transforming the existing food system by adapting it to the changing environment.



## Exercise: Agroecological principles



### YOUR TASK:

After the introduction of the principles, we would like to explore them in further depth. In so-called “station” learning, you will discuss your understanding of each principle with your peers, exchange on examples for addressing the principles and talk about what is easy and what seems difficult. After each “station” you will move in a circular motion to the next and start anew.

1. Each small group starts with a discussion on their understanding of the respective principles.
2. After the general discussion, you can provide examples of possible actions for each of the principles.
3. Discuss what you would expect to be easy or challenging.
4. Add any other comment or suggestion.



### TIME:

approx. 45 min

Figure 1: The 13 principles of agroecology with the simplified operational principles (adopted from HLPE, 2019)

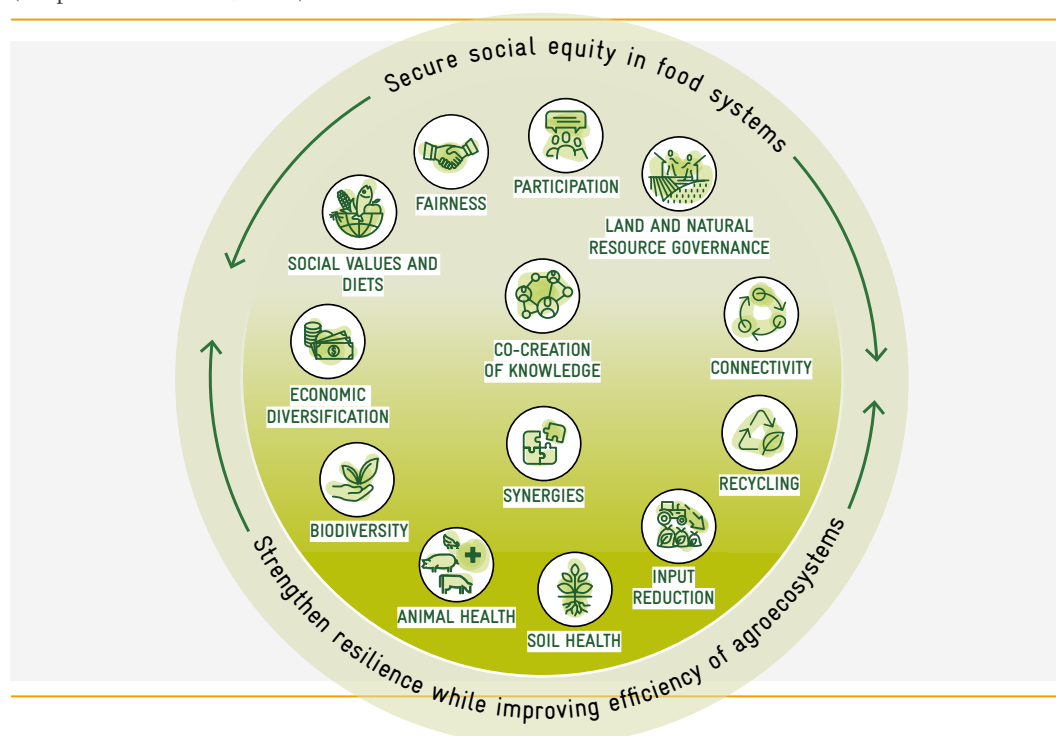


Table 1: The 13 principles in detail (adapted from HLPE, 2019; and interventions examples from Biovision, 2019)

PRINCIPLE	EXPLANATION	INTERVENTION EXAMPLES	SCALE OF APPLICATION*
<b>IMPROVE RESOURCE EFFICIENCY</b>			
1. RECYCLING	Preferentially use local renewable resources and close, as far as possible, resource cycles of nutrients and biomass.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nitrogen fixing cover crop and leguminous green manures, crop sown for mulch</li> <li>Recycling domestic, municipal, industrial wastewater, use of desalinated water</li> <li>Bioenergy from corn stalk, rice husk, slaughter waste, third generation biofuels, biogas from manure, organic agricultural waste</li> <li>Measures to reduce food waste at consumption level</li> </ul>	FI, FA
2. INPUT REDUCTION	Reduce or eliminate dependency on purchased inputs and increase self-sufficiency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved monitoring, precision agriculture to reduce synthetic fertilizer</li> <li>Compost, manure, cow dung</li> <li>Cover crop for weed suppression</li> <li>Use of steam, UV treatments, LED lighting, insect sex pheromone, plant extract that attract insect pests to traps, neem spray, wood ashes</li> </ul>	FA, FO
<b>STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE</b>			
3. SOIL HEALTH	Secure and enhance soil health and functioning for improved plant growth, particularly by managing organic matter and enhancing soil biological activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cover crops to reduce soil erosion, run-off, improve soil drainage, increase soil organic matter</li> <li>Reduced tillage: conservation or no-till practices, direct seeding</li> </ul>	FI
4. ANIMAL HEALTH	Ensure animal health and welfare.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Species-appropriate husbandry</li> <li>Improved monitoring, vaccines that reduce the need for antibiotics</li> <li>Animal breeding using conventional, marker-assisted breeding or other breeding methods to reduce the use of external inputs</li> </ul>	FI, FA

\*  
Scale of application:  
FI = field;  
FA = farm, agroecosystem;  
FO = food system



5. BIODIVERSITY	Maintain and enhance diversity of species, functional diversity and genetic resources and thereby maintain overall agroecosystem biodiversity in time and space at field, farm and landscape scales.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of local breeds/varieties, local seed system, seed banks, participatory breeding</li> <li>• Conservation of forest fragments around agricultural lands</li> <li>• Flower strips</li> <li>• Sustainable shifting cultivation, management of heterogeneous landscape</li> </ul>	FI, FA
6. SYNERGIES	Enhance positive ecological interaction, synergy, integration and complementarity among the elements of agroecosystems (animals, crops, trees, soil and water).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agroforestry: diversified farming system integrating crop production and trees</li> <li>• Integrated crop-livestock systems: fish-duck-rice system, silvopasture</li> <li>• Reforestation/restoration/ preservation of natural habitats with clear benefits for agricultural production, diversified land-use or alternate flowering at the landscape level to improve pollination services,</li> <li>• windbreaks, soil erosion control e.g. using hedgerows, half-moon, terracing, stone bunds, contour bounding, Zaï holes</li> </ul>	FI, FA
7. ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION	Diversify on-farm incomes by ensuring that small-scale farmers have greater financial independence and value addition opportunities while enabling them to respond to demand from consumers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project exploring diversification of the production (temporal, nutritional), diversification of work type, access to markets, impact of access to local food on farmer's resilience. Other topics: interactions between agriculture and the wider economy, agritourism</li> </ul>	FA, FO

## SECURE SOCIAL EQUITY/RESPONSIBILITY

8. CO-CREATION OF KNOWLEDGE	Enhance co-creation and horizontal sharing of knowledge including local and scientific innovation, especially through farmer-to-farmer exchange.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Farmer-to-farmer programmes, farmer's groups to share experiences, bottom-up models of technology transfer (participatory ICT tools), social media groups, community of practices</li> <li>• Farmer field schools, climate field schools, participatory research designs, integrate producer's knowledge of agricultural biodiversity and management experience (to research)</li> </ul>	FA, FO
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9. SOCIAL VALUES AND DIETS	Build food systems based on the culture, identity, tradition, social and gender equity of local communities that provide healthy, diversified, seasonally and culturally appropriate diets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversification of crop production with a nutrition focus</li> <li>• Collective action targeting women, creating opportunities for commercialisation, participation in producer groups and education, developing higher levels of autonomy</li> <li>• Self-organisation, associations, capacity to stand for labour rights, land rights, strengthen self-empowerment</li> </ul>	FA, FO
10. FAIRNESS	Support dignified and robust livelihoods for all actors engaged in food systems, especially small-scale food producers, based on fair trade, fair employment and fair treatment of intellectual property rights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policies making rural areas and professions more attractive for youth, structural transformation to boost youth labour demand, promote entrepreneurship and access to productive resources</li> <li>• Policies and programmes that promote inclusive market systems, fair trade, fair employment, fair treatment of intellectual property rights</li> </ul>	FA, FO
11. CONNECTIVITY	Ensure proximity and confidence between producers and consumers through promotion of fair and short distribution networks and by re-embedding food systems into local economies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-supported agriculture (CSA), re-localisation of food systems and markets within same territories, engagement of communities and businesses in sustainable operations,</li> <li>• New innovative markets, participatory guarantee schemes (PGS), e-commerce schemes</li> <li>• Local producer's markets/more traditional territorial markets,</li> <li>• Denomination of origin labelling and certification</li> </ul>	FA
12. LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCE GOVERNANCE	Strengthen institutional arrangements to improve, including the recognition and support of family farmers, smallholders and peasant food producers as sustainable managers of natural and genetic resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Payment for ecosystem services, biodiversity-friendly agricultural regulation and subsidies</li> <li>• Recognition of traditional rights over natural resources</li> </ul>	FA, FO
13. PARTICIPATION	Encourage social organisation and greater participation in decision-making by food producers and consumers to support decentralised governance and local adaptive management of agricultural and food systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support multi-stakeholder policy dialogues (integrate CSO/farmer's organisations' demands)</li> <li>• Evidence-based policy planning, support and strengthen science-policy interfaces</li> <li>• Self-organisation, associations, capacity to stand for labour rights, land rights, strengthen self-empowerment</li> </ul>	FO



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### Exercise: Levels of agroecological transition

Steve Gliessmann has proposed a framework for classifying five levels of food system change<sup>1</sup>. These are meant to serve as a roadmap that outlines in an almost stepwise manner a process for transforming the entire global food system.



#### YOUR TASK:

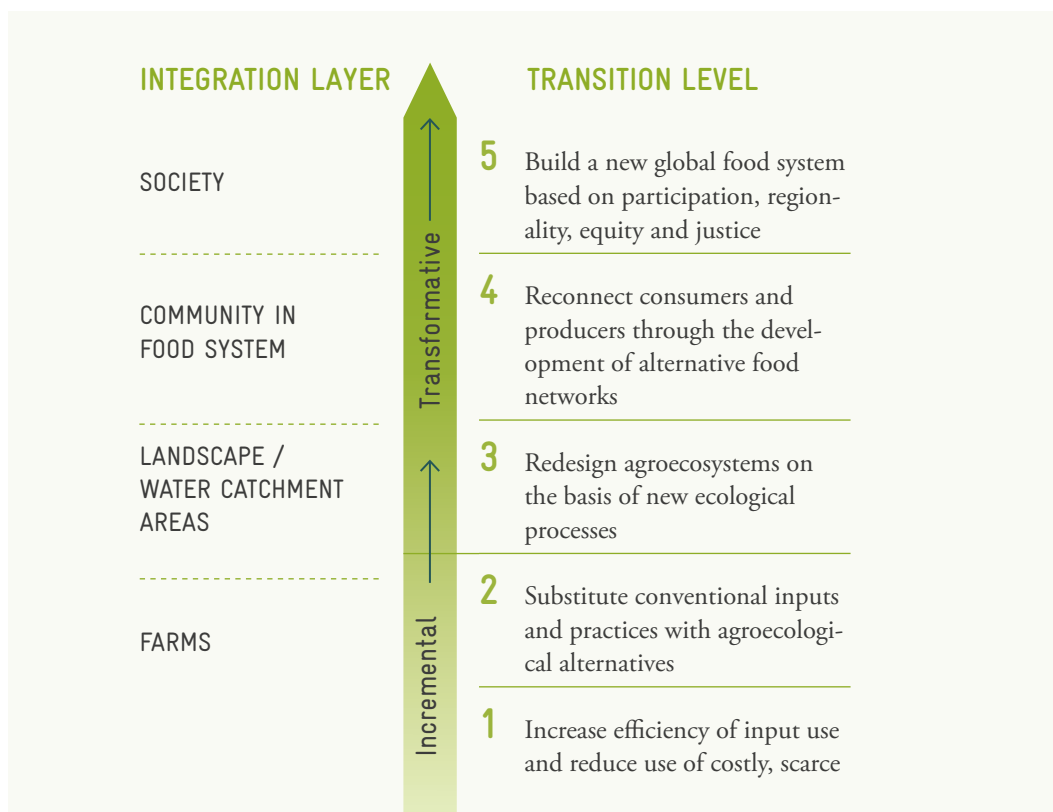
Discuss your understanding of the level (one level per group) and prepare for explaining it well to the plenary (use some visualisation). Include a reflection on which principles would be relevant for the level and add the corresponding symbols to your presentation.



#### TIME:

approx. 15 min

Figure 2: Transition levels and integrations layers (Source: adapted from HLPE, 2019)



<sup>1</sup> Source: Steve Gliessman (2016) Transforming food systems with agroecology, Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems, 40:3, 187-189, DOI: 10.1080/21683565.2015.1130765

**Level 1:** Increase the efficiency of industrial and conventional practices in order to reduce the use and consumption of costly, scarce, or environmentally damaging inputs. The primary goal of change at this level is to use industrial inputs more efficiently so that fewer inputs will be needed, and the negative impacts of their use will also be reduced. Most conventional agricultural research has taken place at this level, through which considerable modern agricultural technologies, inputs, and practices have been developed. This research has helped farmers maintain or increase production through such practices as improved seeds, optimum planting density, more efficient pesticide and fertilizer application, and more precise use of water. So-called “precision agriculture” is a recent focus of research at Level 1. Although this kind of research has reduced some of the negative impacts of industrial agriculture, they do not help break its dependence on external human inputs and monoculture practices.

General criteria for this category (Source: ACT Tool, Biovision)

- Approach focused on increasing/maintaining yield AND reducing external input use

**Level 2:** Substitute alternative practices for industrial/conventional inputs and practices. The goal of this level of transition is to replace external input-intensive and environmentally degrading products and practices with those that are more renewable, based on natural products, and more environmentally sound. Organic farming and biodynamic agriculture are examples of this approach. They employ alternative practices that include the use of nitrogen-fixing covercrops and rotations to replace synthetic nitrogen fertilizers, the use of natural controls of pests and diseases, and the use of organic composts for fertility and soil organic matter management. However, at this level, the basic agroecosystem is not usually altered from its more simplified form, hence many of the same problems that occur in industrial systems also occur in those with input substitution.

General criteria for this category (Source: ACT Tool, Biovision)

- Reference to improved natural cycles (nutrient cycle, biomass, carbon, water)
- Reference to increased nutrient use efficiency, biological nutrient fixation
- Identifying or adopting practices with reduced impacts on the environment by reducing toxic inputs
- Increased regulation of pest - improved pest management
- Re-establishing soil balance/ soil health

**Level 3:** Redesign the agroecosystem so that it functions on the basis of a new set of ecological processes. At this level, fundamental changes in overall system design eliminate the root causes of many of the problems that continue to persist at Levels 1 and 2. The focus is on prevention of problems before they occur, rather than trying to control them after they happen. Research on whole-system conversions has provided an understanding of key yield-limiting factors. Agroecosystem structure and function is better understood, and appropriate changes in design can be implemented. Problems are recognised, adjustments made in internal site- and time-specific design and management approaches, instead of solely by the applications of external inputs. A good example is the reintroduction of diversity in farm structure and management through such actions as ecologically-based rotations, multiple cropping, agroforestry, and the integration of animals with crops.

General criteria for this category (Source: ACT Tool, Biovision)

- Selective combination/integration of components (between among livestock, aquatic animals, trees, soils, water, other components)
- Scale of the system: farm or landscape level
- Explicit objective to optimize 1 or multiple ecological functions or ecosystem services
- Agroecosystem is viewed holistically and redesigned in order to prevent problems known from conventional agriculture-Increasing functional, species, local, crop, agro biodiversity
- Project that works to improve the resilience of the farming system: the project should have a clear conceptualization of the concept of resilience and measure the impact of management on the recovery of one or more ecosystem services in response to one of multiple disturbances

**Level 4:** Re-establish a more direct connection between those who grow our food and those who consume it. Food system transformation occurs within a cultural and economic context, and this transformation must promote the transition to more sustainable practices. At a local level, this means those who eat must value food that is locally grown and processed, and support with their food dollars the farmers who are attempting to move through Levels 1 – 3. This support becomes a kind of “food citizenship” and can be seen as a force for food system change. Communities of growers and eaters can form alternative food networks around the world where a new culture and economy of food system sustainability is being built. Food once again must be grounded in direct relationships. An important example is the current food “re-localization” movement, with its growing networks of farmers’ markets, community supported agriculture schemes, consumer cooperatives, and other more direct marketing arrangements that shorten the food chain.



**Level 5:** ...build a new global food system, based on equity, participation, democracy, and justice, that is not only sustainable but helps restore and protects earth's life support systems upon which we all depend. ...Level 5 involves change that is global in scope and reaches beyond the food system to the nature of human culture, civilization, progress, and development. The depth of change is more than mere conversion or transition, and enters into the realm of full reform or transformation. With Level 5 thinking and action, agroecology provides ways to build upon farm-scale and farmer-driven change processes to a full re-thinking of how we all relate to each other and to the earth that supports us. Basic beliefs, values, and ethical systems change. The expanding awareness that is part of this process then extends to other facets of environmental and social relationships beyond food, bringing about a paradigm shift focused on how the agriculture and food systems of the future can help reduce our ecological footprint, recognize that there are limits to growth, and what it really means to live sustainably. The important role that food systems can and must play in mitigating and adapting to climate change as a global issue is one example of the value of Level 5 thinking. The growing food justice movement, where everyone in the food system enjoys the benefits of equity, justice, security, and sustainability, is another.

Examples for level 5 approaches are the encouragement of social organization and greater participation and decision-making of food producers and consumers, thus supporting decentralized governance and local adaptive management of food and agricultural systems, and support to policies that put agroecology front.





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# 3.

## SESSION B: ASSESSING INTERVENTIONS

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### Exercise: Agroecology Criteria Tool (ACT)

The ACT methodology by Biovision is based on the analytical framework by Gliessman on the 5 levels of food system change and is embedded within the 10 Elements of Agroecology by FAO (2018). It enables you to assess a project or a policy through the lens of agroecology: it visualizes to what extent a project, a program or a policy is aligned with the various dimensions of agroecology.



#### YOUR TASK:

Please use the Agroecology Criteria Tool to assess the degree to which agroecological levels and elements are being addressed in the project.

1. Summarize your general feedback regarding the results (bullet points).
2. Display your assessment results in a spiderweb chart.
3. Please summarize your results to present them in the plenary session.

You can either use the online ACT tool on the website or download an excel file to analyse and compare multiple projects/policies.



#### TIME:

approx. 30 min

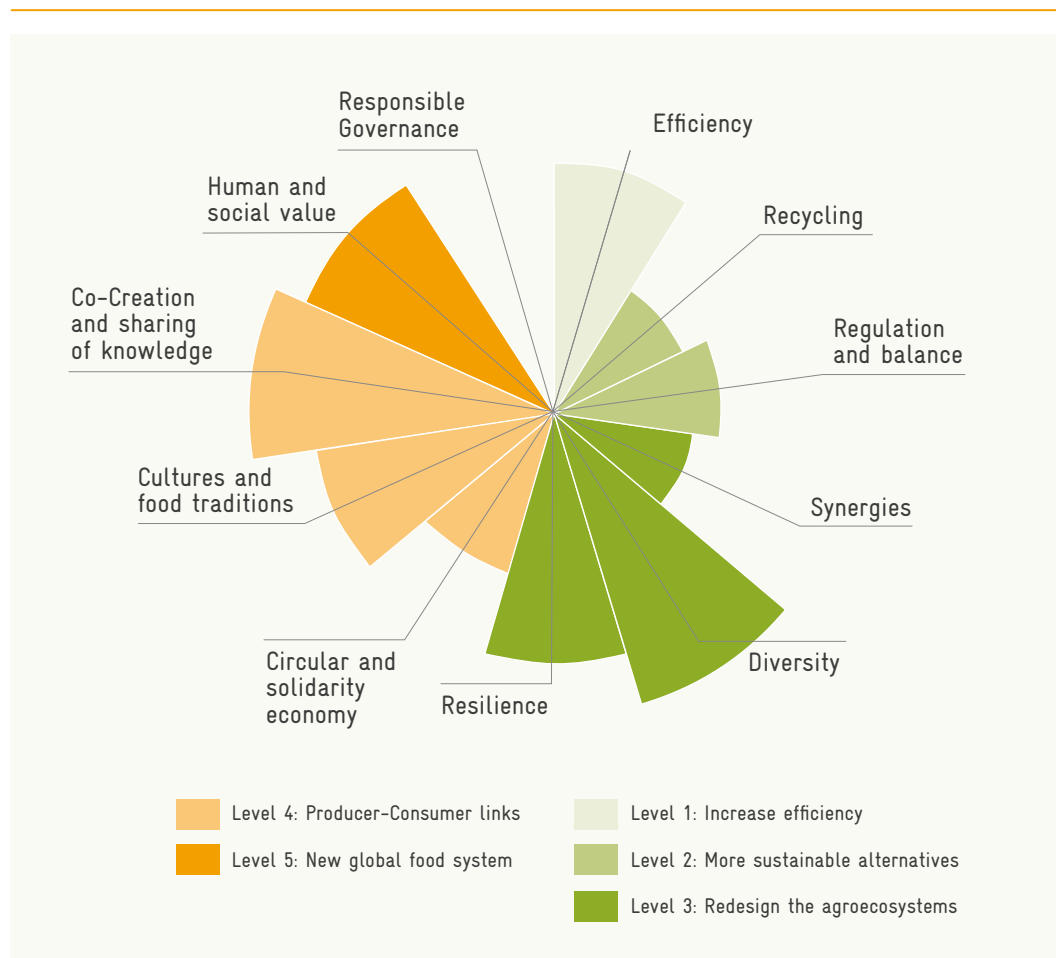


#### ➔ Agroecology Criteria Tool (ACT).

The Agroecology Criteria Tool (ACT) methodology is based on the analytical framework by Gliessman on the 5 levels of food system change and is embedded within the 10 elements of agroecology by FAO. It provides a structured and graphically intuitive way to identify the focus and agroecological character of an initiative or project.

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Figure 3: Exemplary result from ACT application (Biovision, 2020).





### Exercise: Agroecology Mainstreaming Continuum



#### YOUR TASK:

Please first agree on a case giver and the case itself. The latter can be either a specific project or a country or region or a policy/programme. Please choose a moderator and a person who will present your results to the group.

Please read this instruction first. The case presenter will then briefly present the main aspects of his/her example. Then work as a team through the following questions one after the other for each dimension and visualize the results:

- Step 1:** Classification of the project (country/region) on the continuum: Where is it positioned and why?
- Step 2:** Definition of the desired and feasible progress: Where should we head to?
- Step 3:** Identification of the contributions necessary for achieving this progress:  
Who should do what in order to achieve the desired status defined in step 2?  
Depending on the actual case: What can the project contribute?  
How can you as an actor support effort to progress towards the goal?

Please visualize the results.

Optional/issues for discussion:

- Challenges: What are the specific barriers to a better integration of agroecology into the political and institutional structures of our partner countries?
- Opportunities: What factors promote this integration?
- How would we identify in our respective working context whether agroecology is well/ sufficiently anchored in the political and institutional system of our partner countries?

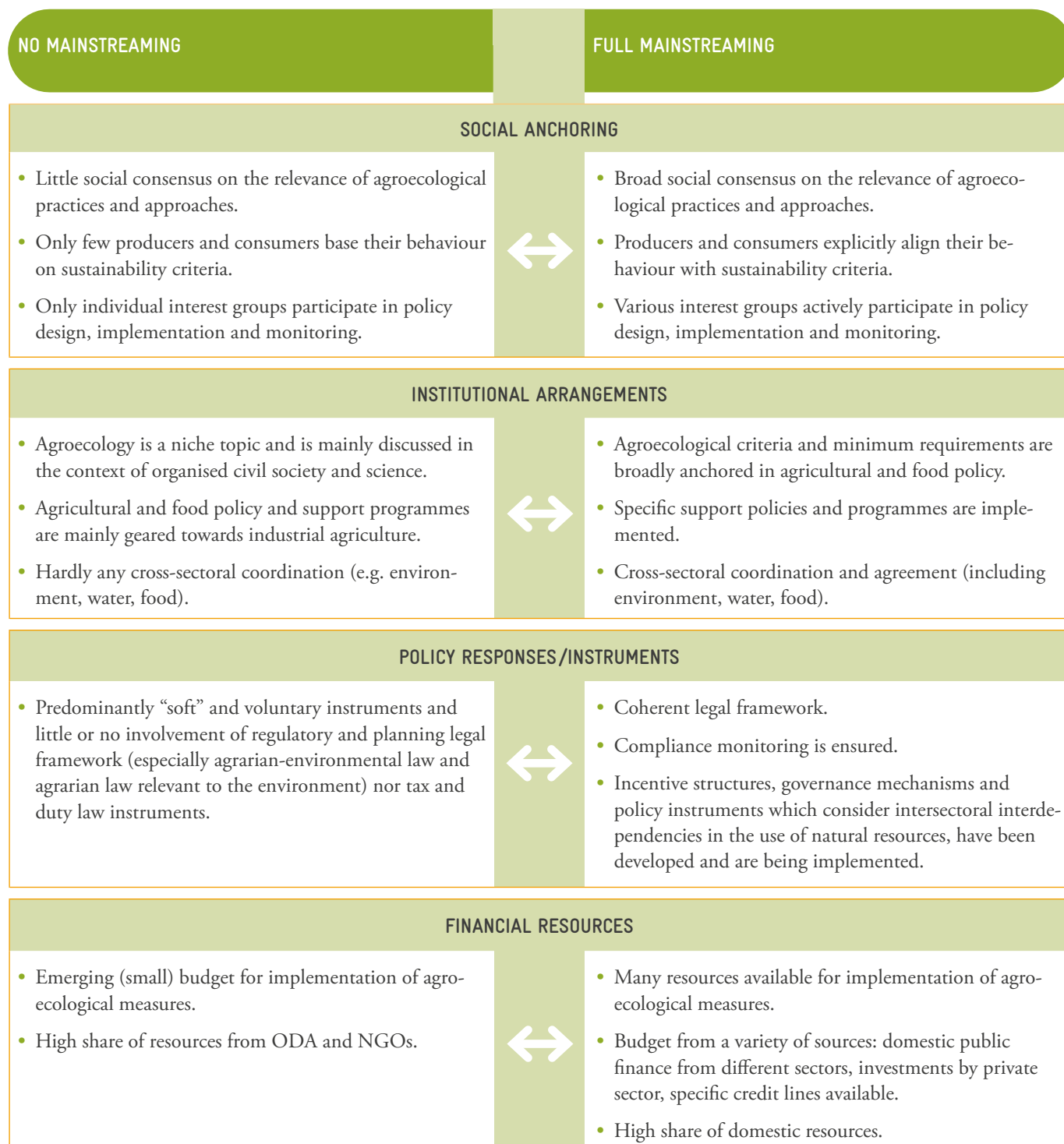


#### TIME:

approx. 45 minutes



“Agroecology continuum<sup>2</sup>” to reflect the status and strategic orientation of projects along five dimensions of mainstreaming.



<sup>2</sup> The „agroecology continuum“ was developed on the basis of the „biodiversity mainstreaming continuum“ (see GIZ materials on mainstreaming biodiversity and policy advice).

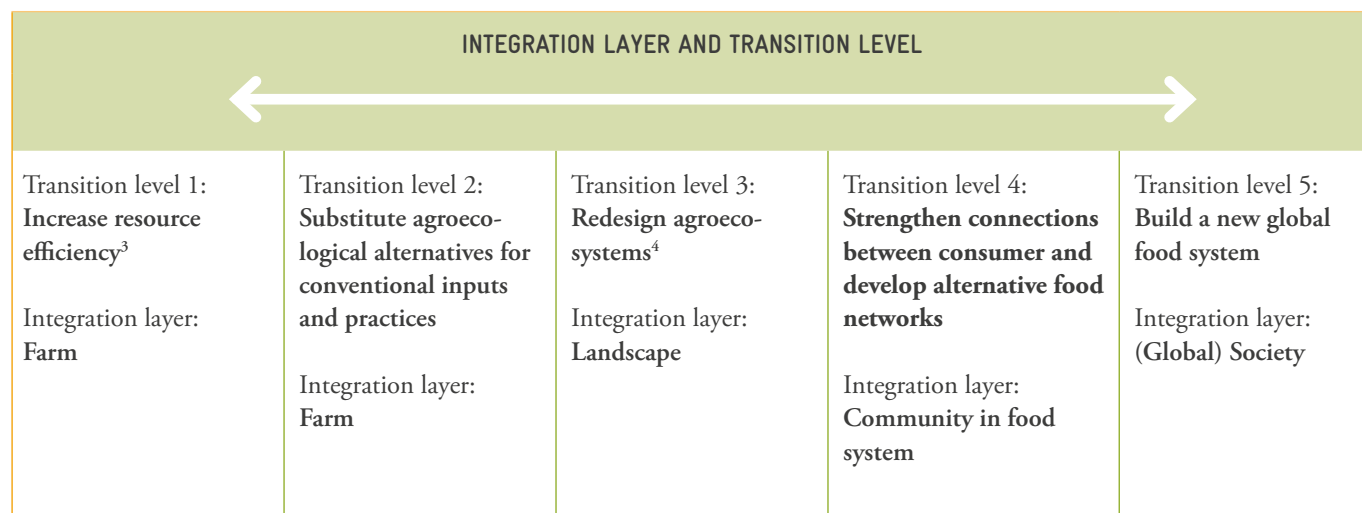
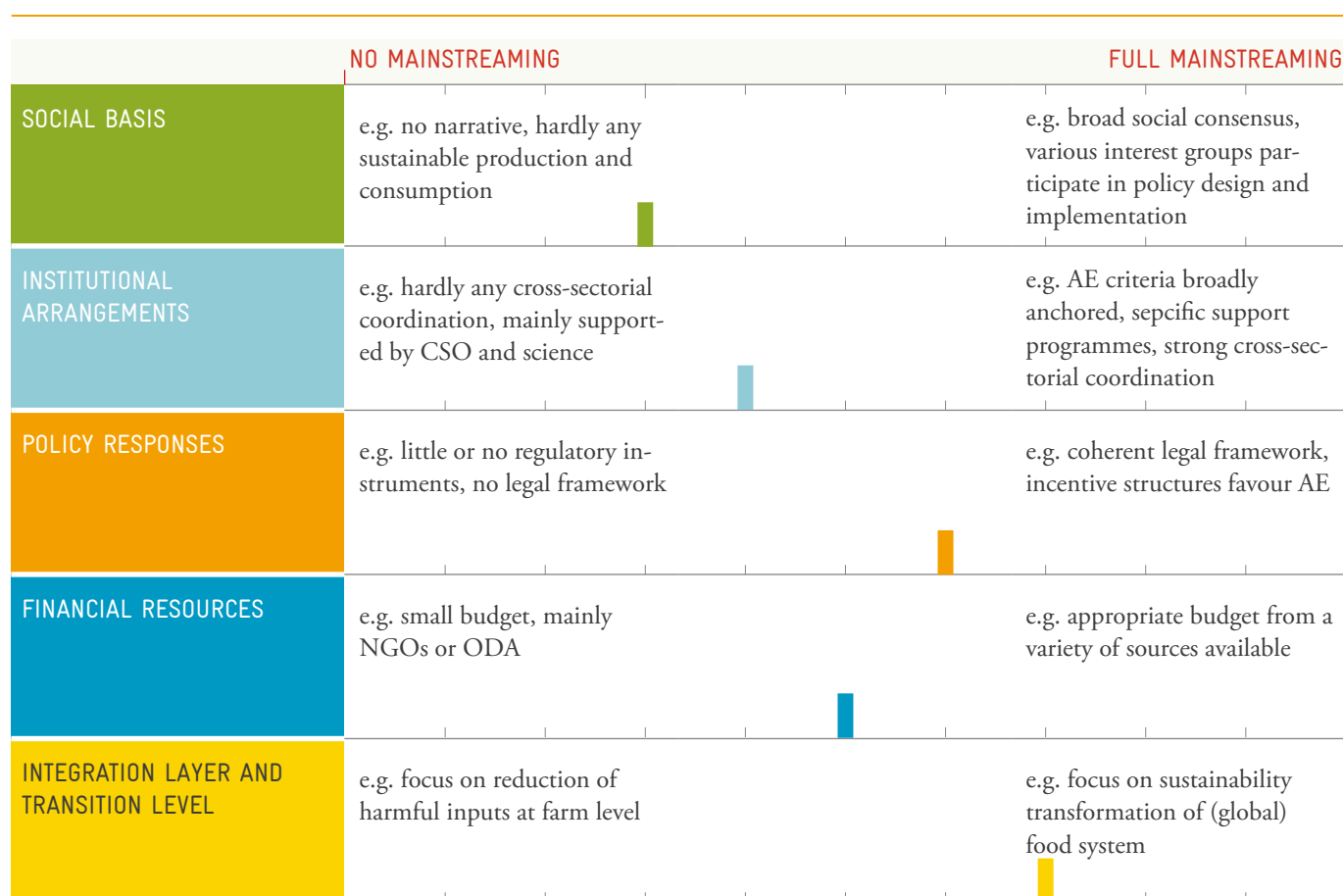


Figure 4: Agroecology mainstreaming continuum – Exemplary application and visualisation of the continuum.



<sup>3</sup> Reduction of external scarce and environmentally harmful inputs.

<sup>4</sup> Integration of agroecological practices at farm level as part of landscape-based approaches and system conversion based on ecological principles.



[Space for personal notes]

## 4.

## SESSION C: INTEGRATING AGROECOLOGICAL APPROACHES

## Exercise: Ideas for strengthening agroecology in the project



Use the findings from the previous assessment with ACT to think about options and actions that will most effectively contribute to an agroecological transformation.

**YOUR TASK:**

**Step 1:** What needs to be changed? Why?

Please bear in mind the following: gender aspects, climate change adaptation and sustainable livelihood strategies.

**Step 2:** Describe different options and actions and reflect on how easy or difficult it might be to implement them.

You can discuss how to implement them by looking at factors such as relative ease of implementation, urgency, risk of losing an opportunity to effect change, available resources or other interesting criteria. Keep in mind that a mix of complementary measures might be required, especially considering gender aspects, climate change adaptation and sustainable livelihood strategies.

**Step 3:** Identify key stakeholders to be involved in the activities and those with whom you would need to communicate to effect change.

**Step 4:** Are there any additional suggestions and recommendations? E.g. What framework conditions are needed for a successful implementation of project or programme?

Prepare your key messages and present your recommendations.

**TIME:**

approx. 60 minutes group work

approx. 30 minutes presentation and discussion

WHAT DO WE WANT TO CHANGE? WHY?	NEW/DIFFERENT OPTION(S) AND ACTIONS	KEY STAKEHOLDERS AND STAKEHOLDER GROUPS	SUCCESS FACTORS AND IMPORTANT FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS



### Exercise: The message box

The message box method<sup>5</sup> helps you formulate a message based on the problem as experienced and articulated by the target audience. Use it to check that the way you formulate your message, your solution and the proposed benefits of that solution do indeed correspond to the problem the target audience is experiencing.



#### YOUR TASK:

Please follow the message box below to structure your message and prepare to present it in the plenary session. Here are guiding questions:

- Put the target audience's problem into words.
- Why is the problem important or pressing for the target audience?
- How can you help? What do you plan to do?
- What will be the benefit of your actions?
- The test: Will what you plan to do solve the other party's problem? Or will it at least have a positive impact?



#### TIME:

approx. 30 minutes

Figure 5: The message box



<sup>5</sup> Adapted from: <https://www.communicatierijk.nl/vakkennis/factor-c-in-english/message-box-in-english>



### Exercise: Successful communication

Communication is the link between all stakeholders – trust, respect, transparency and openness towards other perspectives and standpoints are essential. Thus, communication, education and public awareness are all vital to the successful integration of agroecological approaches into public and private decision-making, so as to transfer information to stakeholders and the general public.



#### YOUR TASK:

Please follow the steps below and summarize your results to present them in the plenary session. Agree on one or two spokespersons from your group.

- Step 1:** Formulate a concrete policy change objective to which the project (will be specified by trainers) should make a significant contribution. Express the objective in the form of a change compared with the present situation.
- Step 2:** Identify the most important interest groups that are or would be affected by this change. Assign these groups to one of the four categories shown below:

POLICY CHANGE OBJECTIVE (PLEASE ENTER)	
<b>A1: Currently active supporters</b>	<b>B1: Currently active opponents</b>
<b>A2: Potential supporters (“sleepers”)</b>	<b>B2: Potential opponents (“sleepers”)</b>

- Step 3:** Select 2 of these 4 groups and formulate just **one message** for each of them that you wish to communicate. A policy message should be a **single sentence**. It should be easily understandable for the intended audience and as compatible as possible with the audience’s value system and mental models.
- Step 4:** Which interventions are appropriate as a way of conveying the messages to these audiences? Don’t limit yourself to media-based communications. Think about using your full repertoire of options, e.g. forums, capacity development and strategic alliances. Alliances of this kind primarily involve three categories of partners:
- “Networkers” (to provide access to important social groups)
  - “Academics/scientists” (to provide authority and credibility)
  - “Salesmen” (to invigorate otherwise dry messages and actively feed them into the policy discourse)

You could structure the final table as follows:

POLICY CHANGE OBJECTIVE (PLEASE ENTER)	
<b>A1: Currently active supporters</b>	<b>B1: Currently active opponents</b>
Message:	Message:
Means and media:	Means and media:
<b>A2: Potential supporters (“sleepers”)</b>	<b>B2: Potential opponents (“sleepers”)</b>
Message:	Message:
Means and media:	Means and media:



TIME:

approx. 60 minutes



Deutsche Gesellschaft für  
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices  
Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Friedrich-Ebert-Allee 32 + 36  
53113 Bonn, Germany  
T +49 228 44 60-0  
F +49 228 44 60-17 66

E [info@giz.de](mailto:info@giz.de)  
I [www.giz.de](http://www.giz.de)

Dag-Hammarskjöld-Weg 1-5,  
65760 Eschborn, Germany  
T +49 61 96 79-0  
F +49 61 96 79-11 15