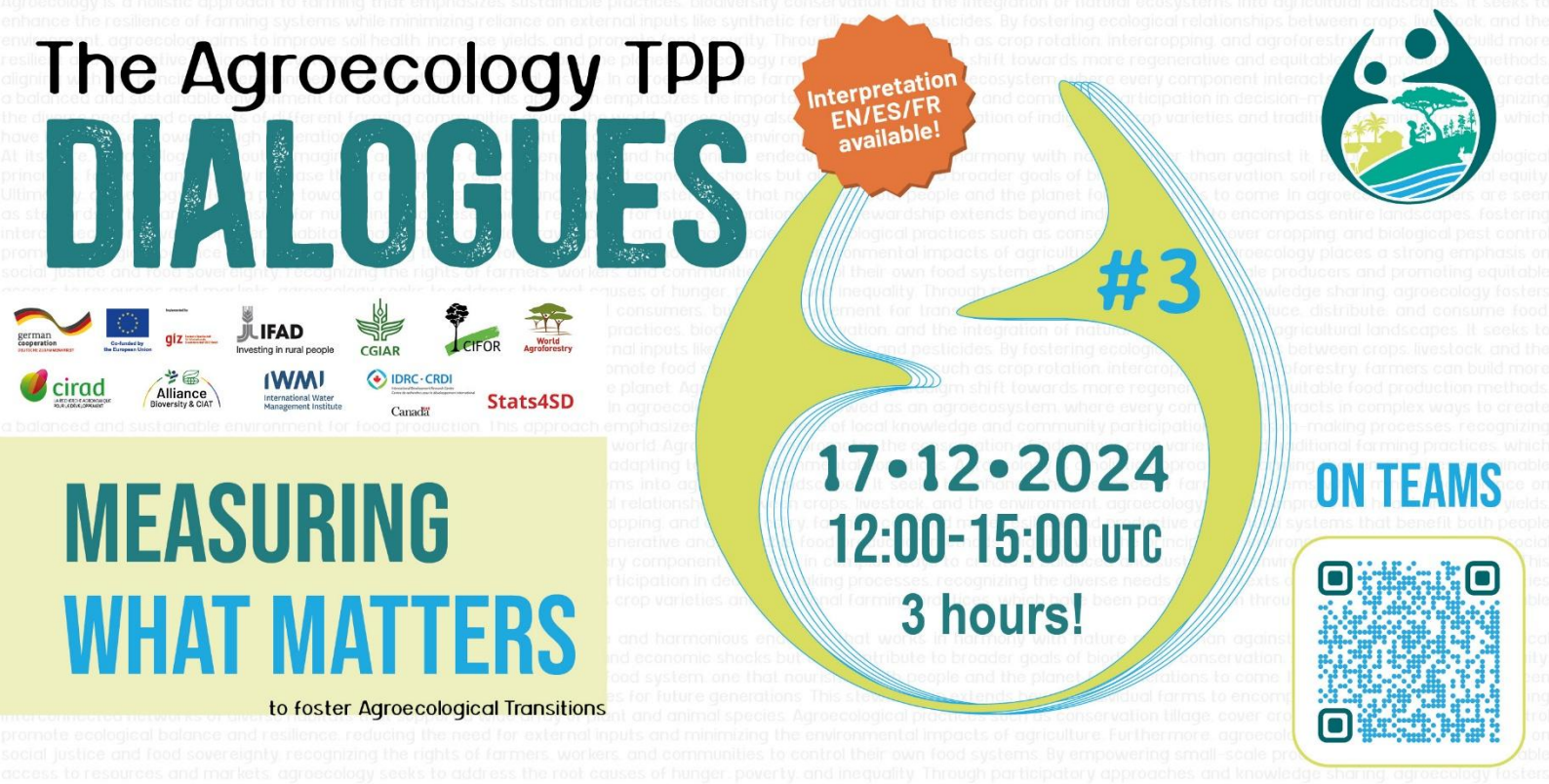


TPP Dialogue #3 • Measuring What Matters

To foster agroecological transitions

EVENT REPORT

Background

Measuring agroecology and its performance is inherently complex due to its multi-dimensional nature, encompassing ecological, social, and economic aspects. Existing assessment frameworks often focus on individual components, neglecting the synergistic interactions crucial to agroecology. Moreover, the long-term and emergent nature of agroecological benefits makes it difficult to assess performance within short timeframes. Participatory approaches involving farmers and local communities are essential for capturing context-specific knowledge but can be challenging to implement consistently.

Overview

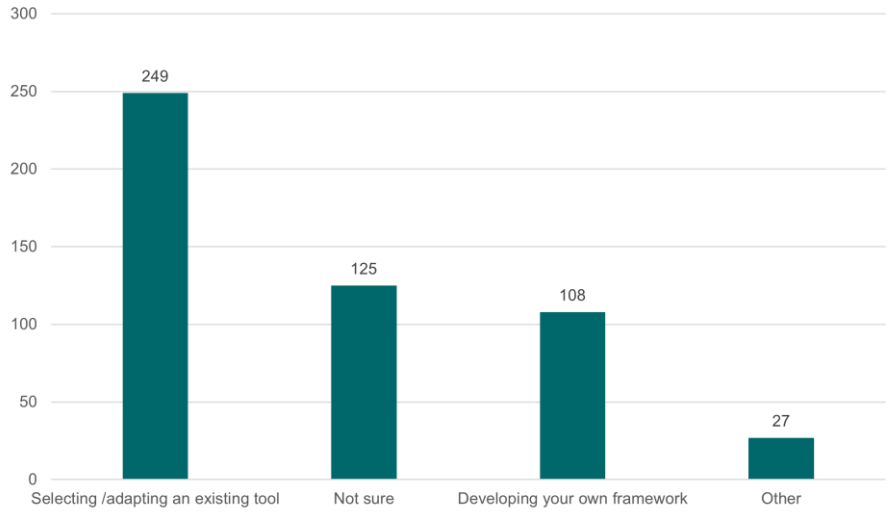
On 17 December 2024, the Transformative Partnership Platform for Agroecology (AE-TPP) held its third AE-TPP Dialogue "Measuring What Matters – to foster Agroecological Transitions". The fully online workshop presented recent developments and innovations in the area of metrics for agroecology through the Holistic Localized Performance Assessment (HOLPA) tool and the Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation (TAPE); the event presented novel evidence on the performance of agroecological farms and farmers; and introduced resources to support diverse users design contextually relevant agrifood systems assessments.

Pre-event Survey Results

While registering for the event, registrants were asked two key questions regarding the theme of the event. We received almost 1000 responses. Here are the questions posed and main recurrent themes:

Question 1: When it comes to assessing the performance of agri-food systems, are you more interested in?

a) Selecting and adapting an existing tool
b) Developing your own framework and metrics
c) Not sure—seeking guidance on where to start
d) Other



Option a received the most votes with **249** selections.
Responses received under **"other"** included:

- "**Both**" by several registrants
- Using and adapting **TAPE**
- Wanting to know more about how best to support others wanting to conduct assessments ("**helping others** do all of the above", "**hearing what others need** from assessment")
- Finding out more about **how to present results** – how to use results in a relevant way and **produce and present data** in ways people need
- Just wanting to explore – "wanting to **know what's out there**"

Question 2: What are the challenges you face when it comes to assessing the performance of agri-food systems and what do you think could be done to address these challenges?

Registrants shared a variety of responses including:

- How to integrate and aggregate indicators of different levels. Measuring across scales is complex
- Identifying relevant indicators that are in use (standardisation of approaches)
- There are many indicators and tools – how to choose the right indicators and find the right tool?
- Existing tools are too complicated, especially for non-experts/farms
- Lack of ways to communicate results, especially to farmers
- Cost and time constraints
- Lack of funding and public support
- Limited data availability
- Lack of a tool that fit the geographical context

Question 3: How do you currently decide what is important to measure and how to measure it?

Top responses:

- Use of participatory approaches – by talking to people within the system, co-design, interviews, focus groups
- Using existing conceptual frameworks to guide selection, e.g. 13 principles
- Log frames and M&E plans, KPIs
- Relevance and feasibility
- Literature and journal articles
- Bases on what data is available

Question 4: What information sources do you currently use to select indicators?

Registrants shared a wide range of sources including:

- Scientific articles
- Project Reports
- Case studies
- Existing tools: TAPE, B-ACT, HOLPA
- FAO guidelines, donor guidelines
- Experts

Event Statistics

Here are some key statistics from the day of the event

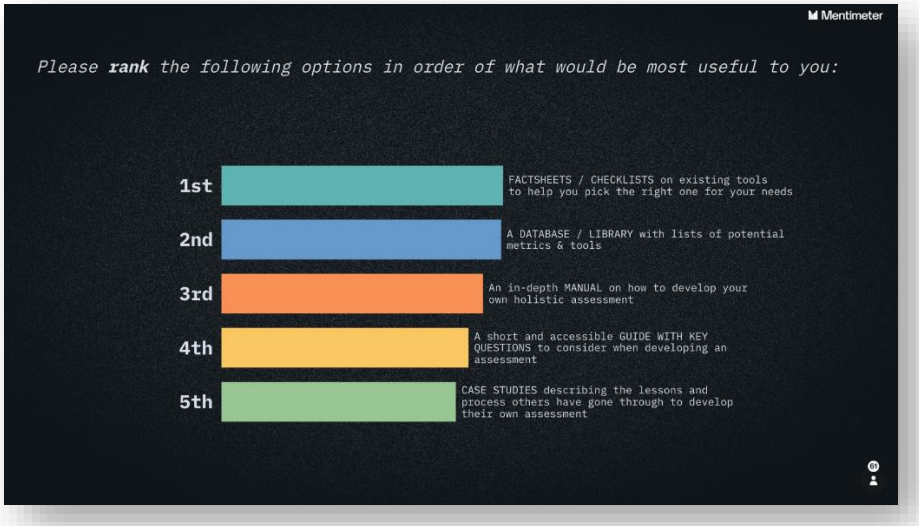
- Event registrants: **600+**
- Participants: **252**
- Panelists: **5**
- Materials developed: **6 presentations**

Polling Results

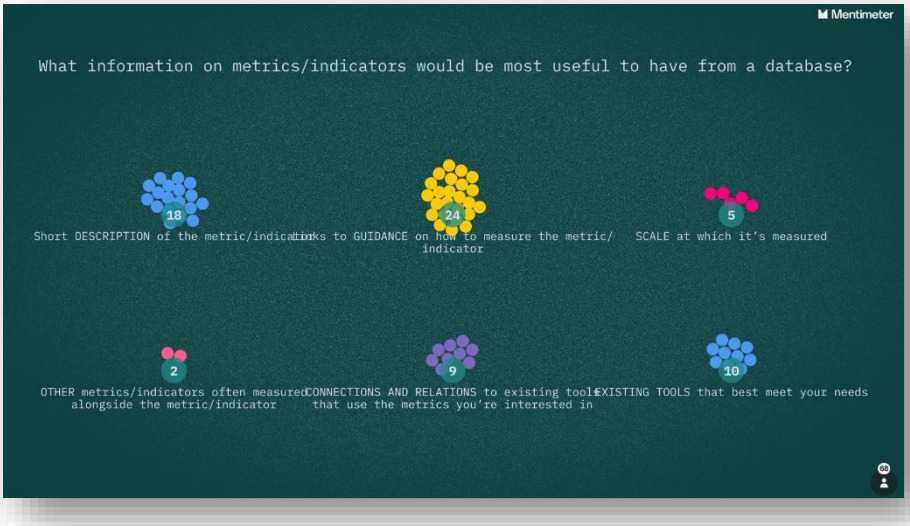
During the event, participants completed a short quiz consisting of two questions.

1. For the first question, they were asked to rank the following resources in order of usefulness:
    - **Factsheets/checklists** on existing metric tools
    - A **database/library** of potential metric tools
    - **Case studies** highlighting lessons from others
    - An **in-depth manual** on developing one's own holistic assessment

The results showed that **factsheets/checklists** were ranked highest, followed by **a database/library** in second place and **an in-depth manual** in third. **Case studies** were ranked as the least useful.



2. For the second question, participants were asked what type of information on metrics/indicators would be most useful to include in a database. The option **"Links to guidance on how to measure the metric/indicator"** received the highest number of votes, with 24.



Group Discussions

Following the presentations, participants were separated into 4 break-out groups to discuss broader questions and challenges of metrics and assessments for measuring agroecology. This spanned farm and field-level assessments all the way to landscape and food system level measurements.

Group 1: Farm and Field Level Assessments

Farm and field-level tools like TAPE and HOLPA measure agroecological performance primarily from the perspective of farmers and those working directly with them. They present various challenges, including:

- **Time Consumption:** A major issue is the time required to administer these tools. Respondents cite interviews taking up to 2 hours per farmer, making it difficult to gather data from large numbers of farmers and impacting farmer participation.
- **Contextual Relevance:** Tools often need significant adaptation to fit local contexts, including language and specific criteria (e.g., number of crops for "diversification"). This adaptation process is also time-consuming.
- **Subjectivity:** The interpretation of questions and responses can be subjective, leading to inconsistencies in data and impacting analysis.
- **Farmer Agency:** Lengthy assessments can reduce farmer agency and engagement.
- **Integration with Other Data:** Challenges exist in integrating these tools with other data measurement approaches and technologies (e.g., soil tests).
- **Top-Down Approach:** There's a concern that indicator selection is often top-down, rather than driven by farmers themselves. Farmers should be asked what indicators they deem important.
- **Focus on Small-Scale Farmers:** In some regions, like South Africa, agroecology is primarily practiced by small-scale farmers, and tools need to be adapted to their specific circumstances.
- **Motivation for Agroecological Practices:** The example of a farmer installing a biogas digester highlights the need to understand farmers' motivations for adopting agroecological practices, such as pest management, and to address the challenges they face.

In sum, the discussion highlights the need for agroecological assessment tools to be more efficient, contextually relevant, farmer-centric, and integrated with diverse data sources to effectively support the adoption and success of agroecological practices.

Group 2: Selecting Metrics for Different Purposes

A central question with any assessment or data collection exercise is how to effectively communicate results and information to be able to influence agrifood systems transformation. Through this discussion, participants discussed that data communication has some challenges:

- **Report Length & Complexity:** Farmers often lack time to read lengthy reports
- **Audience Tailoring:** Information needs to be tailored for different audiences (farmers, policymakers, researchers)
- **Negative Perceptions:** Agroecology is sometimes viewed negatively, particularly regarding profitability

- **Lack of Communication Skills:** Clients may struggle to communicate their efforts effectively

In response to these identified challenges, participants brainstormed key solutions to overcome them, including:

- **Concise & Clear Messaging:** Information should be presented in a way that is quick to understand, with clear messages.
- **Visual Communication**: Infographics, colorful and easy to read, can effectively convey value.
- **Mobile-Friendly Access:** Data should be accessible on mobile phones/apps (Nita).
- **Participatory Approach:** Stakeholders should be involved in the whole process, including communication.
- **Farmer-to-Farmer Sharing:** Facilitate knowledge exchange between farmers.
- **Benchmark Reports:** Provide farmers with personalized benchmark reports showing their strengths and areas for improvement.
- **Focus on Key Figures:** Highlight a few key figures instead of overwhelming with data.
- **QR Codes:** Use QR codes to connect consumers with information about the farm and its practices.
- **Highlight Social Aspects:** Report on social aspects like health and nutrition to provide farmers with needed arguments.
- **Training & Support:** Offer training and support to improve communication skills.

In sum, for farm and field level assessments to maximize impact, users and assessment designers need to ensure:

- **Accessibility:** Information must be easily accessible and digestible.
- **Relevance:** Content should be relevant to the specific needs and interests of the audience.
- **Participation:** Engaging stakeholders in the communication process is crucial.
- **Actionable Insights:** Communication should lead to actionable insights and drive positive change.

Group 3: Global vs. Local Indicators

In striving to adopt or adapt existing metrics and assessment tools for agroecological performance, there is a tension between the need for comparable global data and locally adapted indicators for specific contexts and decision-making levels.

Key Challenges:

- **Context Specificity:** Systems are context-specific (biophysical, social, economic), making it difficult to apply a single measurement approach universally.
- **Complexity and Confusion:** Too many tools and excessive contextual relevance can confuse decision-makers and hinder support for agroecology.
- **Contextual Variation:** Agrifood systems are highly contextual, making meaningful assessment difficult.
- **Data vs. Action:** Concern that too much effort is spent on data collection rather than implementing alternative systems.

- **Cost-Efficiency:** Combining global and local indicators is expensive and time-consuming.
- **Power Dynamics:** Questions about who decides what to measure and whether grassroots organizations and small-scale farmers have a voice.
- **Temporal Differences:** Need to consider temporal dynamics of transitions, not just static differences.
- **Competition:** Debate on whether competition between agroecological and conventional systems is necessary (e.g., for premium pricing).
- **Scale Issues:** Tools like TAPE are designed for global use but may not be suitable for local decision-making.
- **Data Overload:** A lot of effort is put into data production, but the value and purpose of comparison need clarification.
- **Indicator Selection:** Debate on whether to prescribe specific indicators or allow flexibility. Concerns about who drives indicator selection and the potential exclusion of smaller organizations.
- **Integration of Results:** Difficulty in integrating results from different tools like TAPE and HALPA.
- **Political Considerations:** Awareness of the political regimes and power dynamics influencing indicator selection and data access.

Proposed Solutions and Approaches

- **Experimentation:** Accepting the need for diverse approaches and experimentation.
- **Clear Goals:** Defining clear goals and scales for assessment.
- **Combined Indicator Approach:** A core set of globally comparable indicators combined with locally relevant ones is considered the best way forward (LIST approach).
- **Flexibility:** Providing guidelines and different performance levels for indicator selection, allowing teams to choose what fits their context.
- **Adaptation:** Recognizing the value of adapting tools to local contexts, potentially focusing on the adaptation process itself as a support for transition.
- **Focus on Value:** Emphasizing the added value of comparison for countries and communities in relation to the energy invested.
- **Non-Negotiable Indicators:** Identifying key, non-negotiable indicators while allowing for local adaptation.
- **Participatory Approach:** Involving stakeholders in indicator selection and data interpretation.
- **Objective-Driven Assessment:** The approach should depend on the assessment's objective (global vs. local).
- **Focus on "Why" and "How":** Everyone, regardless of scale, wants to know if and how agroecology works in a given context.
- **Flexibility Around Core Indicators:** Fixed core indicators are important, but flexibility should be allowed.
- **Rethinking Comparison:** Need to clarify what, why, and for whom comparisons are being made (self, conventional, among agroecological farmers).
- **Levels of Transition:** Focus on levels of transition rather than a binary "agroecological/non-agroecological" classification.

- **Concrete Principles:** Need for clear, agreed-upon descriptions of agroecological principles.

In sum, the participants agreed that a nuanced approach that balances global comparability with local relevance was crucial. Any assessment must clarify the purpose and value of comparison, while recognizing the political and power dynamics in data collection and use, as well as being sensitive to participatory and contextually grounded data collection. Participation and collaboration are essential for effective assessment and support of agroecology.

Group 4: Landscape and Food System Level Assessments

This discussion opened with trying to break down what different levels of food systems meant and what are key characteristics of assessments at these wider/higher levels as assessments focused solely on the farm level are insufficient for capturing the full picture of agroecology. Analyzing landscapes and local food systems is crucial for understanding interactions, dynamics, and the broader social, political, and ecological context within which farms operate.

- **Landscapes**: Defined by biophysical boundaries, including non-farmland like wetlands and forests.
- **Local Food Systems (LFS):** Crucial for agroecology, encompassing social and political aspects. The concept of "territory" is relevant but requires careful consideration of potential political implications.
- **Agroecological Transitions (AETs):** Primarily occur at the LFS level, where many agroecological principles apply, and governance/policies operate.
- **Scale Issues:** Factors don't scale linearly between levels; the aggregate of farms doesn't represent landscapes or LFS.
- **Interactions and Dynamics:** Landscapes and LFS require studying interactions and dynamics between components, not just static status.
- **Multiple Agents:** More agents are involved at landscape and LFS levels, requiring diverse metrics.
- **Resource Flows:** Resource flows between landscape components need assessment at the landscape/LFS level, not applicable at the farm level.
- **Context for Farms**: Understanding the landscape and LFS context is essential for understanding individual farms, as farms are not isolated entities.

One participant from Portugal referred to agroterritory analysis using a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach, which is uncommon in Europe, as one landscape level assessment approach. This analysis involves all food actors in the assessment process and utilizes diverse tools, such as TAPE, to address specific groups and questions. The entire process has spanned two years. Essentially, it's a community-level assessment focusing on governance and capacity, employing an inclusive and multifaceted methodology over a significant period.

There are various complexities of assessing agroecology at landscape (LL) and local food system (LFS) levels, going beyond just farm-level assessments. These include:

- **Limitations of Farm-Level Aggregation:** Simply aggregating data from farms doesn't capture the full picture of LL and LFS dynamics.
- **Cost of Assessment:** Assessing at LL and LFS levels is more complex and expensive, though group assessments can be more cost-effective than individual ones.

- **Conceptual Confusion:** There's a lack of clarity and consistent understanding of concepts related to landscapes and territories, with existing literature not always helpful.
- **Tool Redundancy vs. Systemic Understanding**: The question is raised whether all existing tools are needed at multiple levels, or if a better conceptual framework is needed to understand how assessments connect and provide a deeper understanding of the systems.
- **Need for Longitudinal Data:** Tracking changes over time is crucial for agroecology assessment, but longitudinal data collection can be expensive.
- **Innovative Methods:** Exploring non-standard methods like remote sensing and crowdsourcing to manage costs and complexity.

Reflections

Through the presentations and ensuing discussions, the dialogue highlighted the intrinsic challenges of measuring agroecology which envisions agrifood systems performance and transition across several dimensions. This creates a tension with conventional or mainstream metrics and measurement approaches that often prioritize a single or narrow set of outcomes.

“Measuring what matters” is often contingent on varying contexts, priorities and visions for the future of agriculture and food systems that do not further compromise the environment, local communities and their cultures, and agrifood livelihoods. This requires a more nuanced approach to measurement that captures the intricate systems of actors, networks and activities and their effects on one another within the agrifood system to attain the multidimension outcomes for more sustainable, agroecological futures.

Deliverables

- A blog post on Forests News
- Proceedings of event shared with registrants and posted online:
    - Event report (this document)
    - PPTs
    - Workshop recording
    - Pre-event reading materials
        - The Transitions Metrics Library flyer - Link
        - Holistic Localized Performance Assessment (HOLPA) tool for collecting locally relevant and globally comparable evidence of agroecology’s effects on nature and people - Link
        - Measuring agroecology and its performance: An overview - Link
        - Developing holistic assessments of food and agricultural systems: A meta-framework for metrics users - Link
        - Measuring Agroecology and its Performance (MAP) - Link

Lessons Learned

- **Adopt a multi-dimensional and holistic framework**: Measuring AE assessments must go beyond single-outcome metrics and consider the interconnections between ecological, social, and economic factors.
- **Balance global comparability with local relevance**: A central tension in AE measurement is the need for both comparable global data and contextually relevant, local indicators. A one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective due to the diversity of biophysical and socio-economic contexts. The solution is to use a combined indicator approach, with a core set of global indicators and the flexibility to add locally relevant ones.

- **Participatory and farmer-centric approaches**: Involving farmers in assessments from the start makes data more relevant, builds trust, and increases uptake, but it is important to ensure that their participation is meaningful, voluntary, and respectful of their time.
- **Ensure effective and accessible communication of results**: Collecting data is only the first step - results must be communicated clearly and accessibly to drive change. Keep messages concise, use visuals and actionable insights, and share results on accessible platforms so farmers and policymakers can easily understand and apply them.

To achieve these points raised, researchers have 3 key responsibilities:

1. Use methods that make the evidence as robust as possible, for example, validating, triangulating, using mixed methods, etc.
2. Be open about the limitations of findings and evidence.
3. Seek to change the demand for evidence to something more reasonable.