Regreening and Increasing Agroecological Integration

CIFOR-ICRAF: Focusing on smallholders' assets and agency to sustainably scale | Western Kenya

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Empowering communities to drive their own sustainable land restoration is not just a strategy; it's a movement. With support from the Biovision Foundation, CIFOR-ICRAF's asset-based community-driven development (ABCD) team initiated the 'Regreening Kenya by Scaling Asset-Based Community-Driven Development Tools and Processes' project, commonly known as 'ABCD in Regreening,' from January 2021 to February 2024.

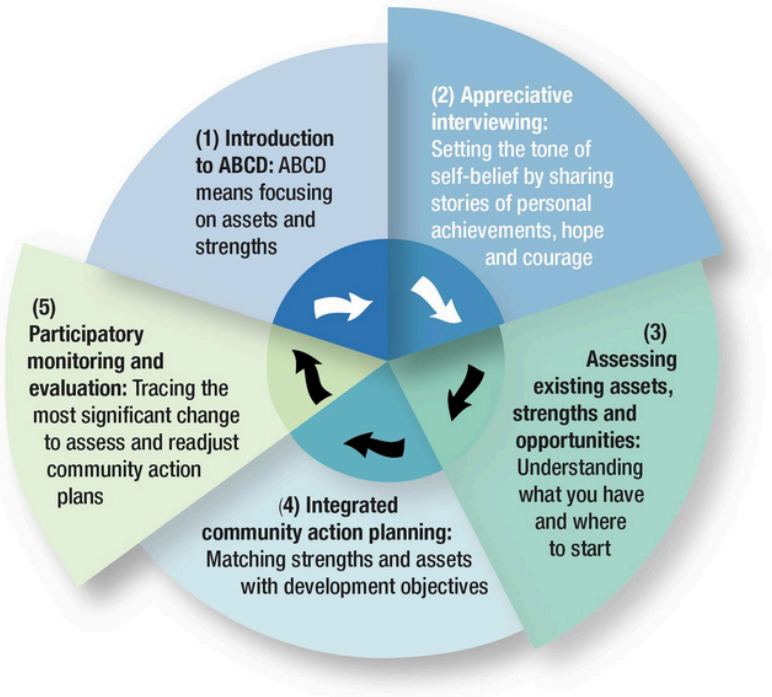
BACKGROUND

The project was implemented in Homa Bay County, a key intensification site for Regreening Africa in western Kenya (see Figure 1). Regreening Africa, recently recognized as a UN World Restoration Flagship project, was conducted from 2017 to 2023 across 8 African countries with support from the European Union. In Kenya, the goal was to restore 150,000 hectares of degraded farmland by encouraging 50,000 smallholder farmers to adopt sustainable practices, with 20% directly targeted by World Vision Kenya's interventions.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS APPROACH

The primary objective of the 'ABCD in Regreening' project was to strengthen the adoption and sustainable engagement of smallholders in land restoration practices within Regreening Africa's intensification sites.

Recognizing that sustainable restoration must be driven by those who manage the land, the project aimed to overcome structural and behavioral barriers through an asset-based and agency-focused approach. The project was implemented over 3 years, from January 2021 to February 2024, using a highly integrated 5-step ABCD process (see below).



The ABCD approach, rooted in community-driven development, builds on people's agency and capacity, aligning with various theoretical frameworks like appreciative inquiry and positive deviance. The ABCD in Regreening project used this approach to empower communities by focusing on existing assets and agency, self-assessment, and self-evaluation.

The project involved 30 groups selected from the Regreening Africa areas using a purposive structured selection approach.

Drawing on extensive previous action research, CIFOR-ICRAF developed five core intrinsic contribution claims for ABCD (see Table 1).

Table 1. The five intrinsic contribution claims for ABCD

Category	Label	Summary Desciption
Attitudinal changes	*Asset mindset*	*People realize and appreciate what they have*
	Sense of agency	*People believe in their ability to influence their lives positively*
Behavioural changes	*Individual action*	*People decide to start with what they have and use it better, and in a more coordinated way, at an individual level*
	Collective action	*People come together and start with what they have collectively within their social networks to achieve joint objectives*
	Strategic collaborations	*People use their social networks to find solutions through strategic collaborations and partnerships with external actors*

Source: Fuchs et al. (forthcoming)

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The ABCD process led to significant inner transformations among participants. Through tools like appreciative interviewing and human asset assessment, individuals gained a deeper understanding and appreciation of their identities, interests, and preferences. This process fostered a strong sense of agency, enabling participants to realize their potential and believe in their ability to positively influence their lives. The project also enhanced participants' awareness of their communities' resources and opportunities, encouraging more efficient use of these assets.

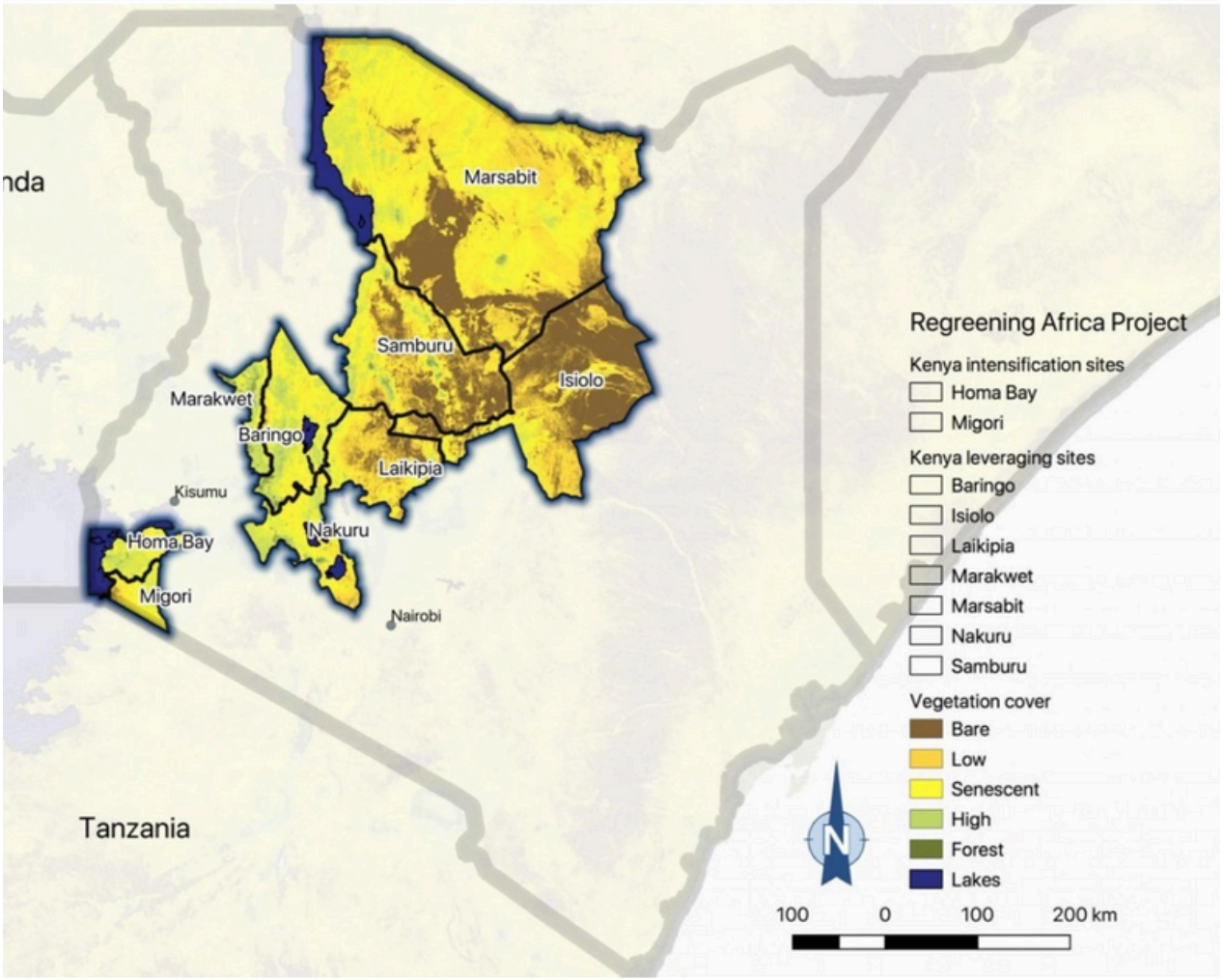
At the community level, the project contributed to increased collective action and strategic collaborations.

While individual behavioral changes were more pronounced, collective mobilization towards joint objectives was also evident, particularly among well-connected groups. The ABCD approach encouraged communities to seek targeted support from external actors, improving development efficiency and fostering more sustainable outcomes. The project's contributions were recognized by Regreening Africa, highlighting the approach's success in driving sustainable land restoration.

LEARNINGS

One of the main challenges encountered was resistance to the ABCD approach from some external actors, who felt that community-driven methods undermined scientific rigor. There was also skepticism about the effectiveness of in-depth engagement processes, which were perceived as slow and resource-intensive. Additionally, proving the effectiveness of low-cost interventions did not always gain the respect or attention it deserved, as the project sizes were considered too small to make a significant impact.

Figure 1: Regreening Africa sites in Kenya including the 'intensification' site in Homa Bay in western Kenya



Source: Regreening Africa, 2022.

Despite these challenges, the project identified significant opportunities for scaling up. Strong alliances with like-minded partners played a crucial role in promoting the ABCD approach, leading to increased interest and investment. The ABCD team's strategic collaborations with Regreening Africa and other organizations opened doors for further integration of the ABCD approach into broader development and research initiatives. The approach's flexibility and content-neutrality make it an ideal strategy for integrating into any project aiming to co-create solutions with communities.

The 'ABCD in Regreening' project demonstrated that sustainable land restoration can be effectively driven by communities when they are empowered to leverage their assets and agency. The project's success in fostering inner and outer change, despite challenges, highlights the potential for scaling the ABCD approach in other contexts. The key lesson learned is the importance of participatory, community-driven approaches that respect local knowledge and capacities, ensuring that external support is responsive and collaborative.

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