CASE STUDY

Collaborative Plan Sharpens Focus of Africa Forest Carbon Catalyst Program

Facilitated 3-Day Workshop Aligns Partners on Mission and Action

Africa is home to one-fifth of the planet's remaining forests — but is losing them faster than anywhere else on Earth.

Protecting forests is one of the most cost-effective natural defenses against climate change we have. Yet to date, multiple complex organizational and political situations have made it challenging for conservation and reforestation projects to gain momentum in Africa and around the world. These efforts often face limited or inadequate capacity, markets, frameworks, and political will, causing many projects to struggle in their attempts to reach sustainable and scalable outcomes.

TEAM:

Africa Forest Carbon Catalyst (AFCC)

PROJECT:

Supporting conservation and reforestation projects in Africa

AGILITY LAB OFFERING:

Theory of Change refresh

IMPACT:

A refreshed Theory of Change built with wider input and clearer directives to match the adapting and growing AFCC team and its mission

TNC 2030 IMPACT GOAL: Carbon Emissions + Healthy Lands

✔ Agility Lab

✒ Agility Lab

The good news: Recent advances have broadened the opportunity for success, including the efforts of the Africa Forest Carbon Catalyst (AFCC), a Nature Conservancy team that is working with partners to accelerate solutions to forest conservation across the continent. The Nature Conservancy developed AFCC to find and refine forest restoration and conservation projects to slow or reverse forest loss and help abate climate change.

The program provides conservation projects with both technical and operational advice, helps build their teams and networks, and prepares them to successfully seek investment to scale. According to their initial Theory of Change, AFCC aims to support projects and enterprises that by 2025 will cumulatively avoid or reduce 20 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions annually and restore or conserve 10 million hectares of African forest.

Since its launch in 2021, AFCC has been working to support the development of a pipeline of high-quality, natural climate solutions projects with the goal to create 5,000 jobs in Africa and improve the livelihoods and well-being of 500,000 Africans.

In 2020, the AFCC team developed a Theory of Change — a roadmap for how the interventions will address specific problems and achieve outcomes — that was tested and refined during the first two years of the program, and which the team determined would benefit from a refresh.

The AFCC team has grown and the market has changed since their initial Theory of Change draft in 2021. The group, several shown above, worked with Agility Lab to refresh its Theory of Change in 2023 to continue to reach the fullest potential impact in their work to conserve African forests.

✦ Agility Lab

AFCC team members Kevin Juma, Austin Omutto, and Catherine Fitzgerald share why they decided to refresh the team's Theory of Change in 2023: "We had reached a mid-point where we needed to check whether the interventions and support that we were providing to partners were appropriate to scale and were still relevant within the context of a fast-moving carbon market. We were looking to review the contribution of AFCC toward the attainment of TNC's 2030 Goals and the levers that we might rely on to achieve more meaningful impact."

ThinkPlace Kenya Capacity Development & Brokering Business Unit Lead, Wanja Gitau, one of the workshop co-facilitators, says the team sought to assess its learnings and apply those to improve the existing Theory of Change through an expert-facilitated Agility Lab workshop.

> "The team felt there was a need to pause and reflect by taking stock of AFCC successes and lessons and applying them to refining the focus for the Theory of Change refresh that will lead to a greater impact"
>
> — CATHERINE WANJA GITAU, SENIOR STRATEGIC DESIGNER

The Evolution of a Theory of Change to Drive Alignment and Impact

The AFCC team reached out to Agility Lab to refine the progress indicators in its Theory of Change and identify who was responsible for them to most effectively and rapidly advance its mission. "The existing Theory of Change was created before the successful growth of the program, so the Theory of Change refresh presented an opportunity for new team members to really engage in the work at the strategy level and help shape the future of AFCC," says ThinkPlace Kenya Behavioural Research and Design Lead, Cassie Hornsby-Waide.

Adjustments to the existing Theory of Change began by widening the people and perspectives represented in the process. New voices included both global and regional partners, the lead fundraiser for the team, and economic expertise.

"There was a lot of different expertise that they brought into the room, including regional-level leadership," says Agility Lab Program Manager, Alexia Preston.

Over the course of a three-day workshop in Naivasha, Kenya, AFCC and other key parties met to discuss key components of the initiative. Feedback from global and regional key parties who could not participate in the live workshop was solicited in advance and incorporated into the process.
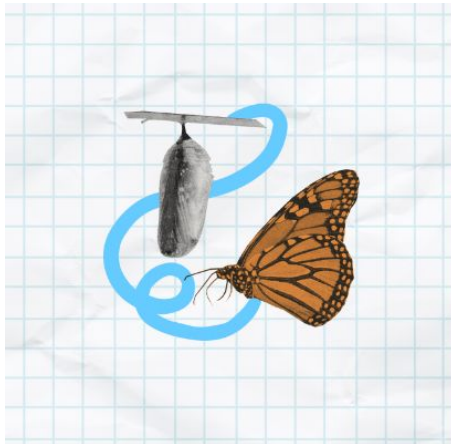
Agility Lab

THEORY OF CHANGE WORKSHOP SERIES

The AFCC team participated in a multi-day workshop with Agility Lab facilitators to refresh their Theory of Change. The Theory of Change workshop series empowers teams to enhance team alignment, and improve communication with external stakeholders in order to adaptively manage their work.

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The AFCC team members share: "Before the workshop, there were differences in approaches to what AFCC should and shouldn't do. The biggest credit to the Agility Lab team is helping the team achieve consensus during the process. Through careful coordination and facilitation, all the arguments were laid bare, and critical areas of convergence were identified while creating more time to tackle the divergent opinions."

A 3-Day Workshop to Help Guide and Drive Lasting Outcomes

One outcome of the Theory of Change refresh workshop was a clear need for further consideration of AFCC's role in influencing the market and policy surrounding carbon-market financing in Africa. While developing the new Theory of Change, Hornsby-Waide says the team realized they could have the most impact by demonstrating best practices and serving an influencing role through other organizations.

"The workshops helped bring out discussions that the AFCC program should play a role in improving the quality and standards of carbon markets through improving the management of their projects and showcasing outcomes to carbon market players," Gitau says. "This was a new focus/problem area for them."

During the workshop, the team discussed and identified a need for shorter-term monitoring and reporting evaluation to help demonstrate AFCC's early results to donors and other key parties, as well as how rapidly the market is adapting.

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>
> — AFCC TEAM MEMBERS

KEY COMPONENTS ADDRESSED DURING THE THEORY OF CHANGE REFRESH WORKSHOP:

- Assess the team's understanding of the current AFCC Theory of Change
- Review of the existing Theory of Change components and identification of gaps
- Align on a new, refreshed version of the Theory of Change, which includes:
    - Considering new partnership models
    - Seeking and elevating innovative practices among the projects AFCC supports
- Begin conversations regarding the operationalization of the Theory of Change and the next steps
- Consider new partnership models

"They will be able to use their intermediate results as indicators of their progress, which can also be used in communication and reports with their key donors," Preston says.

Gitau adds, "They realized they needed to focus on how they set the gold standard, the bar of excellence for how high-quality carbon projects should be run, and needed to move quickly in doing so."

Hornsby-Waide says the team also recognized that not all actions need to be owned by AFCC. Instead, the project calls for inter-team collaboration across TNC, with AFCC providing more visibility to teams around what they do and also relying on other TNC teams — such as policy and communications — to support some of AFCC's big-picture goals.

These and other lessons will shape the AFCC work going forward. Gitau says the Agility Lab continues to support the operationalization of the refreshed Theory of Change by following up on important next steps and testing critical assumptions to minimize potential risks.

Preston says that all the lessons learned ultimately help strengthen not only AFCC but also put the team in a position to encourage and instill adaptive management practices among their partners. "They have a stronger focus on sharing best practices and ensuring their partners are making adjustments as they learn what is working and what isn't working," she says.

In the end, all these improvements strengthen the program and its conservation impact — bolstering the protection of African forests and the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands of people now and into the future.

Let's collaborate.

Take two minutes to let us know about your project and we'll be in touch to explore how we might work together.

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