
AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION UNIT

Strategic Plan 2010-12



AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION UNIT
Research for a Better Afghanistan

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Introduction

Background

Since its establishment in February 2002,¹ AREU has engaged in three strategic planning processes to guide and sustain its development. This document represents the third plan, laying out AREU's commitments for the period 2010-2012 aimed at maintaining and enhancing its position as the premier research institute based in Afghanistan.

This strategic plan was created through a process that engaged all staff. The perceptions and recommendations of board members and of a sample of former AREU staff and representative external stakeholders (donors, government, NGOs and academia) were also solicited.²

The organisation went through a structured set of strategic planning steps from mid-July to mid-September 2009. These steps included identifying key themes capturing AREU's strengths and best practices, agreeing on the strategic issues AREU needs to address, confirming the organisation's strategic directions, and developing the core strategies to advance AREU in these directions. Two facilitators were engaged to support this process.

The strategic framework which has emerged is ambitious. It marks a point of transition for AREU as it seeks to leverage its established reputation to become a more visible and constructively critical voice in crucial policy debates. It also signals AREU's maturity as an organisation and the need to build stronger internal structures to sustain its development. Finally, it indicates a long-term commitment to building capacity geared toward enhancing Afghan research leadership. While achieving this last goal extends beyond this plan's three year horizon, fulfilling this vision is central to advancing the cause of more informed policymaking for a better Afghanistan.

Mission, vision and core values

AREU is an independent Afghanistan-based research institute. Its mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. To achieve its mission AREU engages with policymakers, civil society, researchers and students to promote their use of AREU's research and its library, to strengthen their research capacity and to create opportunities for analysis, reflection and debate.

As an impartial Afghanistan-based voice dedicated to research excellence, AREU aspires to contribute to the development of inclusive and transparent policymaking processes, driven by the priorities of the Afghan people, which give rise to better informed policies and programmes that improve Afghan lives. To achieve this vision AREU works to promote inquiry, inspire debate and enhance analysis. AREU seeks to foster a work environment of mutual respect, inclusion and learning for all, which engages a diverse, experienced team united in its purpose. Our commitment to building capacity today will shape the future face of research in Afghanistan.

To support progress in achieving AREU's mission and vision, AREU strives to embed the following core values within its daily work.

¹ See Appendix 1 for a brief history of AREU.

² See Appendix 2 for a list of external stakeholders consulted.

Value	
<i>Impartiality</i>	We uphold impartiality in our work through unbiased practice and equitable treatment of all, both inside and outside the workplace
<i>Inclusiveness</i>	We are committed to open and inclusive approaches to promote dialogue, share information and build capacity, within and outside the organisation
<i>Excellence</i>	We are committed to maintaining the high-quality of our work through collective diligence, rigour and learning, and through maintaining our intellectual independence
<i>Mutual respect</i>	We support a friendly work environment that demands mutual respect, honesty and transparency from each of us

AREU's niche and key strengths

AREU has worked diligently since 2002 to establish its position as the foremost research institute based in Afghanistan, respected for its quality research and analysis. Some of the factors supporting AREU's niche include:

Independence and impartiality

Being unaffiliated to any governmental or nongovernmental bodies, benefiting from an independent board of directors comprising of bilateral, multilateral and nongovernmental organisations, and having a flexible donor base have all positioned AREU to independently develop its research programme, own its findings and make them public. AREU's commitment to maintaining its independence has built its reputation as an impartial actor in Afghanistan's reconstruction and development debates.

A mandate to think and challenge

AREU's identity as a research institute sets it apart from other organisations as a place for thinking, analysis and reflection. This is a strong and valued counterpoint to implementing organisations' often frenetic pressure to act. AREU's independence and reputation for impartiality provide it a unique and respected voice with which to constructively challenge assumptions and offer alternative directions.

Afghanistan-based with field links

Being based in Afghanistan with a large proportion of Afghan staff has given AREU a considerable advantage in access to field locations outside Kabul and in close engagement with key national policy stakeholders. These features allow AREU to identify and focus on relevant topics of the moment. AREU's commitment to in-depth field-based research and its engagement with Afghans make it unique in bringing often unheard voices into policy debates which could otherwise be dominated by elite and foreign voices.

Unique information services

AREU's public research library is a rich repository of recent information about Afghanistan not found in any similar institution in the country. AREU's generous approach to publication dissemination in soft and hard copy and its respected *A to Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance* also mark AREU as a one-of-a-kind source of information.

Key strengths that AREU seeks to maintain and improve over the 2010-12 planning period include its:

Reputation for quality research

AREU has become known for its research excellence. This is related to the relevance of its research topics, the in-depth nature of the fieldwork conducted and insightful analysis. The quality and commitment of AREU's staff provide the foundation for its achievements in research excellence.

Capacity development focus

To attract and retain high-quality and committed staff, and to contribute to build the future face of research in Afghanistan, AREU has been and remains committed to providing opportunities for staff development. This includes creating career paths within the organisation so individuals see opportunities to take on more responsible roles, developing and implementing a capacity-development policy, and investing considerable human and financial resources in staff capacity building.

Communication in multiple languages for broader scope of influence

Many of AREU's publications and its website are translated into Dari and Pashto. AREU's multiple-language dissemination has the potential to reach more Afghan policymakers nationally and subnationally as well as university students, civil society and the media.

Research to policy links

AREU has developed a Communications Strategy geared at improving the use of its research among policy actors. AREU's commitment to policy-relevant research that tests policy assumptions and contributes to setting the policy agenda are all strengths to maintain. AREU's recent research on policymaking processes is an important input to building more policy networks and improving links between the research and communications departments.

"Policy actors" is a broad category used to represent those more directly engaged in policy formation processes—such as representatives of the Afghan government (e.g. ministry staff and parliamentarians) and representatives of the UN, embassies and military in Afghanistan and outside—as well as those influencing these decision making processes. This latter group includes the media and national and international NGOs (particularly those with an advocacy role). AREU will work to strengthen existing links with these actors and create new ones where there currently are gaps.

Work environment

AREU aims to maintain a work environment where openness and mutual respect support the development of relationships of trust. It also provides an environment that is conducive to learning and professional development and strives to maintain procedural flexibility.

Strategic Issues

Strategic planning processes provide an opportunity to build on successes while considering areas for improvement or development. Strategic issues for AREU to address over the next three years are described below.

Delivering our mission

Since its inception, a consistent challenge facing AREU has been how to deliver consistently on its three-part mission: conducting research, communicating results and building capacity. Therefore, a key focus of this planning period is to develop and institutionalise practices which support AREU in better integrating these functions in its day-to-day work. This is the overarching aim of the plan. Efforts to achieve it, along with the other goals and objectives detailed below, must be firmly fixed within the realities of the operational context, particularly the unpredictable security environment and its

effects on recruitment and the openness of the policymaking environment to constructive criticism and debate.

Research quality, coherence and relevance

AREU's growth coupled with staff turnover means constant efforts are required to maintain and enhance its research quality standards. These involve investments in building the research skills of junior staff, development of quality review mechanisms to systematise review of AREU's growing number of studies and outputs, and openness to new research approaches which may better suit some research topics.

For the research department to contribute to the overall goal of achieving more consistent delivery of AREU's mission, better research planning is necessary. This will support more explicit acknowledgement of the time and resources that need to be allocated to communications and capacity-building objectives.

There has been growing internal recognition that the existing research department structure does not currently meet AREU's needs. It does not support a coherent research programme and there are gaps in the topics covered, such as around issues of human rights and security. In light of this, rethinking AREU's research department structure and themes is a key point for strategic planning. The relevance of topics in AREU's annual research programmes emerged as another area for attention. This concern reflects the rapid pace of decision-making in Afghanistan and the need for AREU's research programme to focus on problems that either set the policy agenda or respond to emerging issues. Another concern is the effect of the deteriorating security environment on the representativeness of AREU's research. AREU is unable to directly engage in research in a growing number of provinces.

Effective dissemination for greater visibility

AREU's Communications Strategy describes communications tools and channels (e.g., types of publications, events, media engagement, website, networking, library, etc.) and ways to improve them. This strategic plan provides an opportunity to operationalise aspects of the Communications Strategy related to both dissemination and outreach, in order to improve the use of our research and library as well as AREU's potential to inform and influence policy.

Targeting AREU's research publications, in all three languages, at the right level and to the right audiences is central to maintaining AREU's reputation as an important source of knowledge about Afghanistan. AREU also has an important role in disseminating knowledge—both that emerging from our research and that held in our library. While these are all areas where AREU has had considerable success, there remains room for improvement. Efforts to improve the accessibility of AREU's research outputs should not compromise conceptual content for the sake of simplicity. The challenge lies in achieving the right balance between the two.

Improved engagement to foster research use

Outreach and engagement is a vital part of AREU's work. The Communications Strategy addresses these activities directly and provides the means to integrate external engagement activities within the research programme. This strategic plan aims to embed these practices within the research department and to build stronger links between the communications and research functions. As part of this, it is also important to institutionally invest in building relationships with a wider range of stakeholders to increase AREU's visibility. AREU has tended to have a stronger reputation and networks with international actors—these need to be maintained but also extended to incorporate a broader range of Afghan research users. The latter include policymakers in government

institutions as well as media, civil society groups, educational institutes and emerging research centres. Maintaining and strengthening this array of relationships can improve AREU's knowledge of the policy environment, feeding into ongoing research in this area, as well as build capacity among others in how to use research to influence policy.

AREU needs to consider how to focus its energy in the next three years in relation to the many requests from external stakeholders for research training. AREU has expertise among its national and international staff to contribute to such activities. However, attention may be better focused on institutionalising the Communications Strategy and improving research use, while maintaining the existing ad hoc approach to providing research training to others.

Organisational development and sustainability

Over eight years of operating in Afghanistan, AREU has grown as an organisation, resulting in changes in institutional and staff needs. AREU now needs to invest in further developing its organisational environment to begin to accommodate some of these changes. Two areas where attention is needed are career advancement opportunities and the coherence and consistency of capacity-building strategies. To make advances in these areas requires joint responsibility between AREU and its staff, with AREU committing to build staff competencies and staff being self-motivated to invest in their own learning and development. These organisational development activities may require enhancing AREU's human resource department's structure and functions.

Strengthening AREU's organisational environment may mean formalising some procedures. However, AREU must guard against becoming too bureaucratic and losing its open and friendly work environment. As part of this process AREU needs to develop more opportunities for inclusive decision-making and increased staff autonomy and accountability, while improving internal communications. It also needs to identify ways to embed its core values in its daily work and to hold all accountable for their practice.

A final strategic issue is AREU's sustainability as an institution. This requires careful consideration of growth opportunities against Afghanistan's often unpredictable operational environment in terms of funding availability, security and staffing. AREU must increase its financial security through building a more diverse funding base while not sacrificing its independence. Given the changing nature of the legal and institutional context of Afghanistan, AREU's sustainability also requires careful responses to existing and new legislative initiatives. AREU also needs to develop structures to support internal learning and monitoring of progress against this plan, to inform its long term growth strategies. Finally, while based in Afghanistan, and in that sense an Afghan institution, AREU is often perceived to be international. Efforts are needed to begin to change this through a medium to long-term process of bringing more national staff into senior and public roles.

Threats

This plan sets an ambitious agenda, and one made more so in the unpredictable operational context. The deteriorating security context affects where AREU can do its research and may create greater barriers to fieldwork, threatening one of AREU's niches. The security environment has significant indirect effects as well, particularly on recruiting national and international staff and potentially on the funding environment. A context of worsening security and future electoral processes may make the policy environment more politicised and less receptive to research, particularly that which is critical. This may have an effect on freedom of expression, on the willingness among a range of different stakeholders, particularly in government, to engage in dialogue, and on AREU's efforts at

increasing its visibility. AREU will need to be flexible in response to these related threats. Work programmes need to be designed with recruitment challenges in mind, allowing significant time to identify the appropriate staff. Reduced ability to travel in the country may mean AREU focuses more on outreach and capacity building until the situation improves. Communications activities will be developed in ways responsive to the receptivity of the current environment in order to not place undue risks on the institution.

Finally, while AREU has established its reputation as the foremost research institute in Afghanistan, new research centres are emerging. This means AREU cannot be complacent. It must remain aware of its niche, seek to strengthen those features that make it unique, and be open to change when that contributes to the achievement of its mission and vision.

AREU's Core Strategies 2010-12

For the period 2010-12, AREU has identified six core strategies which define the substance of its work over this period. The six strategies relate to: research coherence and quality, outreach and impact, knowledge dissemination, an enabling environment, administrative and financial support services, and organisational sustainability. These core strategies are interrelated, as the diagram on the next page illustrates.

AREU's central functions of research and communications, represented by its first three core strategies, must be jointly enacted to enable AREU to achieve its mission. For the research department, defining a coherent research programme around central challenges facing progress toward peace, prosperity and stability in Afghanistan will facilitate policy influence and research use. During the strategic planning exercise, themes identified as major barriers to progress were weak governance and lack of legitimacy. Therefore, from 2010 AREU will structure its research programme around the themes of "governance" and "legitimacy" such that they form the analytic lens or perspective through which research problems are defined and analysed, forming an underlying structure to the department's work.

These two themes are important because the emergence of an independent, modern state cannot occur without improvements in the way that governance affects people's lives at every level of society. Therefore, effective governance is central to Afghanistan's stability and development. Those working toward this goal need to understand better how governance structures currently operate in Afghanistan. This knowledge can inform debates as to how these structures can be strengthened and/or learned from to create publicly legitimate structures capable of defining and delivering a development agenda in the interests of all Afghan citizens.

AREU's mandate over the next three years is to implement a research programme that builds knowledge on how both informal and formal institutions are viewed by and affect Afghans in their everyday life. Recognising that the legitimacy of institutions is essential for effective governance, the research programme aims to provide an analysis of how institutional legitimacy has been or can be built. This research approach incorporates multiple levels of analysis—that of individuals and households as well as the institutional environment in which they live. It will be applied across a broad range of important topics such as access to justice, electoral processes, security, education, natural resource use and management, local government, civil society and the opium poppy economy. For example, a study may look at the delivery of primary education, perceived outcomes of this education among parents and students, and what these perceptions mean for the legitimacy of the education system and the state more broadly.

Legitimacy is the recognised right to hold and exercise authority.

Governance can be understood as the ways in which institutions exercise authority through maintaining or modifying norms and behaviours. Institutions can be formal or informal and they operate at all levels of human activity.

The research programme will closely examine how governance works, its performance and the roles of the actors involved. It will seek to identify how transparency, accountability and responsiveness to citizens can be increased. Underlying this strategy is the issue of power: who holds it, how it is used, and

how existing power bases could be leveraged towards more legitimate, effective structures and improved delivery of social services.

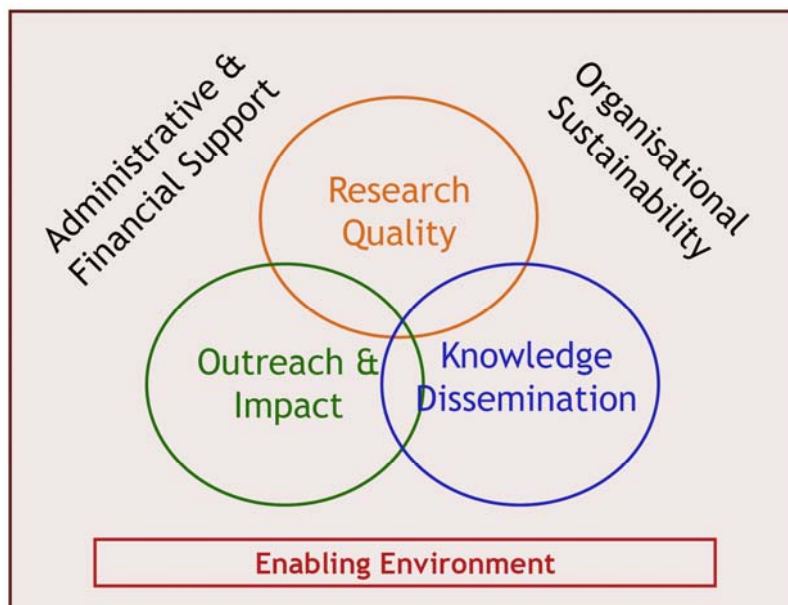
Within these parameters, the studies comprising AREU's annual research programmes will address any of the following issues:

- The nature and function of institutions
- Service delivery systems and their outcomes, including the achievement of poverty reduction and wellbeing
- The agendas, structures and interactions of state and non-state actors
- The effectiveness of international actors in state-building and service delivery
- Emerging efforts to hold state and non-state actors to account

Other priority activities on which AREU will focus to facilitate research use and policy influence include identifying and engaging with policy actors early in research processes, improving research and communications planning, redesigning staff functions to more consistently maintain external engagement, and increasing attention to the accessibility and diversity of research outputs and dissemination mechanisms.

For AREU to advance its new strategies and activities over the next three years, it must continue to support an enabling organisational environment that motivates and makes staff feel valued, builds required capacities, promotes AREU's core values and that enhances open communication. This enabling environment is its institutional foundation. Encompassing all of the above endeavours is maintaining effective administrative and financial support, particularly a stronger human resource function. Finally, AREU staff and Board of Directors must invest more energy in efforts to enhance AREU's institutional sustainability, including strengthening its financial base, monitoring and managing growth in line with resource endowments, and enhancing recruitment of qualified Afghans.

The specific goals and objectives corresponding to the core strategies, which will guide the formulation of AREU's detailed annual work plans over the next three years, are discussed below.



Core Strategy 1: Conduct high-quality and timely policy-relevant research with topics selected through an inclusive process

This core strategy seeks to ensure AREU's research quality standards are maintained and enhanced, while improving the potential for policy influence through a more coherent research programme. It also focuses on research planning processes to improve time management in line with delivering on research, communications and capacity-building agendas.

Goal #1: Increase the coherence, quality, relevance and flexibility of AREU's research programme, improving potential for policy influence

A. Ensure all new studies fit within AREU's new research strategy

This objective addresses implementation of the new research strategy, adding a fit with the strategy as one of AREU's research selection criteria (see text box). A description of how each study fits will be provided in AREU's publicly available annual work plan, which

is also reviewed and approved by AREU's Board of Directors.

AREU's research selection criteria

AREU's research programme must be consistent with, and supportive of, the organisation's vision and mission. Projects are selected based on whether they:

- Address a knowledge gap
- Align with AREU's research strategy
- Have potential to influence and inform policy in terms of:
 - timeliness
 - playing a catalytic role and raising awareness
- Are feasible in terms of:
 - security
 - human resources
 - funding

B. Institutionalise internal and external stakeholder involvement in annual research topic selection processes

C. Increase the geographic reach of AREU's research to increase its regional representativeness

The relevance of AREU's research topics will be

enhanced through institutionalising processes of obtaining inputs from internal and external stakeholders. This is especially important as the number of studies AREU does annually is likely to decline to provide the required time for communications and capacity-building activities. Based on this, selected studies must target "burning issues." Two means of reviewing the relevance of research topics in each annual plan are an internal review meeting among all research department staff and a review of the plan by Board members. In both cases topic selection must be justified.

Research relevance will also be improved by expanding the geographic coverage of AREU's research to represent a broader range of provincial experiences. This will be done in 2010 through strategic partnerships with organisations seeking to improve or obtain research skills, and through planning to establish at least one regional office in 2011 and then expanding from there as funding allows and informed by learning from the first experience. Geographic reach is one dimension against which annual research plans should be assessed internally and by the Board.

D. Maintain and increase research quality through developing on-going quality review mechanisms and building required research competencies

Growth over the past years has led to the need to institutionalise both quality review mechanisms and capacity-building activities. These efforts will ensure AREU uses a wider range of research approaches, as appropriate; is responsive to the interests of qualified junior staff to be engaged in a wider range of research-related activities; and utilises internal systems and external networks to monitor research quality. AREU's research management team is an internal structure which will review concept notes to monitor quality; external peer review of Tier 1 publications is another means of maintaining quality. Investing in an external assessment of AREU's research quality is something to consider in this strategic plan period. Finally, building networks with research institutions and universities in the region and farther afield can also improve research quality and provide opportunities for staff capacity development. Opportunity for partnerships/network building should be factored into decisions about fundraising.

E. Maintain a balance between long-term and short-term studies in AREU's annual research programme

AREU is committed to conducting long-term field-based studies and this is a niche it needs to maintain. However, it also needs to fit with the fast pace of decision-making in Afghanistan, in terms of also engaging in shorter term research that puts a key problem on the agenda or responds to emerging issues. Going forward AREU's research programme must fit both needs. These efforts will be explicit in AREU's annual research plan through information on the timeframe for each study; a benchmark is to have three to four studies each year designed to provide reports within that year.

Goal #2: Improve the research department's capacity to better plan and deliver consistently high-quality research, to communicate its results and to build research capacity

A. Institutionalise the integration of communications, research and capacity-building functions in the research planning process

One way AREU will institutionalise functional integration is improving the research planning process to ensure the research department develops annual work plans which explicitly allocate time and other resources to AREU's three functions. One visible way to assess improvement in planning is through the number of studies proposed in AREU's annual workplan. For the past few years AREU has had about 15 studies, both new and ongoing, in process each year; in future, given AREU's current size, 12-14 studies is a more realistic expectation.

B. Increase opportunities for research staff to take on more diverse and responsible roles in both generating and disseminating knowledge, and to build associated competencies

Improving the consistency with which AREU delivers its three-part mission involves broadening research staff responsibilities to explicitly include communications activities and providing opportunities for junior staff to engage in a wider range of responsibilities across research phases. All of this requires providing opportunities to build the required skills. Improving the diversity of staff roles can enhance staff retention, an important outcome that assists in delivering quality research in a timely way. Research staff job descriptions will be reviewed to ensure they incorporate both research and communications responsibilities; staff involvement in outreach and capacity development activities are monitored for reporting purposes.

Core Strategy 2: Invest in building mutually beneficial and productive relationships with policymakers and influencers to enhance their ability to use AREU's research to inform policy and practice

For AREU to more effectively achieve its aims of influencing policy and practice in Afghanistan, it needs to be better informed of the policy environment and networked with a broader range of policy actors. This necessitates strategic decision-making regarding which institutions or individuals to invest in building relationships with to leverage the most policy influence now and in future. These efforts will be guided by AREU's internal Communications Strategy and integrated with the core strategy on Knowledge Dissemination.

Goal #1: Ensure AREU has strong and productive relationships with a range of policy-related actors

A. Identify and engage policy actors at the beginning and throughout the AREU research cycle

Identifying and engaging policymakers and influencers early in the research cycle, and continuing their inclusion throughout, creates buy-in and interest in the research, increases the relevance and practicality of research recommendations, and strengthens relationships. AREU's research teams are best positioned to advance these activities and they need to be able to allocate time to do so. Evidence of progress in this area can be monitored through AREU's outreach database which documents engagement activities; this is used for quarterly Board reports and reports to donors. Benchmarks to maintain include distributing at least 140,000 papers in hard and soft copies per year and recording 80 citations of individual AREU papers per year in policy, program and academic documents.

B. Expand the policy process research, linking it topically to AREU's other research

AREU's ongoing policy process research builds understanding of policy processes in Afghanistan through analysis of sectoral and cross-cutting public policy case studies, and generates associated contacts for networking. Linking the studies more closely to AREU's planned and future research topics can assist AREU researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the policy environment and how to influence it. Wherever possible, AREU staff rather than consultants will conduct policy process research in order to "capture" the full benefits of relationships built through research activities. Annual commitments to this research program are documented in AREU's annual work plan; this research program should produce two papers per year at minimum.

Goal #2: Increase the strategic effectiveness of AREU's relationships with educational organisations, research institutes and civil society organisations inside and outside Afghanistan

A. Improve and increase AREU's means of sharing research findings and other information in ways that engage people in dialogue and build understanding

AREU will maintain and expand the range of organisations it engages in events such as presentations, forums for dialogue, conferences, open houses and lectures. These events are intended to strengthen staff's ability to engage with, and influence, policymakers in an informed way. Through promoting a culture of learning, AREU may achieve indirect influence on policy through the lobbying efforts of other organisations. When scheduled throughout the course of a research project, such activities can help to foster dialogue

that feeds back into the framing and analysis of the research, as well as to disseminate research results in a timely manner. The number and scope of these events will be monitored through AREU's outreach database, with the aim of consistently carrying out at least 50 briefings, workshops and other presentations with national and international stakeholders per year.

B. Continue the current approach of responding to requests for research capacity building from educational organisations, research institutions and civil society organisations as resources allow, while committing to assess the feasibility of developing and implementing an expansion of these services

Deciding to expand capacity-building support to external stakeholders, particularly to develop research skills, has been an ongoing debate in AREU. Responding to the prevailing demand and need for such capacity building would require organisational commitment, expanded capacity and resources. It also requires a careful assessment of actual demand once interested parties understand the time and financial costs involved, as well as of the existing supply of this service to ensure efforts are coordinated. In the first half of the strategic plan period, AREU will continue its current approach of responding to research capacity-building requests as staff availability allows. Depending on the existing operating environment, AREU will assess the feasibility and value of expanding its external research capacity-building strategy in the lead up to the next strategic planning process, to decide whether or not it is appropriate to take on this added service.

Goal # 3: Increase key decision-makers' use of AREU's research to inform their thinking and practice, and monitor use to improve AREU's research and communications approach

A. Formalise a research project design tool which includes a communication component to assist in identifying relevant policy decision-makers, an engagement strategy, and ways to monitor research use

B. Strengthen mechanisms through which information on research use feeds back to inform AREU's research and communications approach

AREU's policy process research and an impact study started in 2009 to understand how AREU's research has influenced policy are two ways AREU is assessing research use. Learning from these efforts needs to be integrated into research and communications practices; this will be achieved through more communication between departments and updates to the Communications Strategy as needed. To implement the Communications Strategy and any updates, the research and communications departments will together develop a plan, tools and division of labour. As new tools and practices are introduced, communications and research staff must allocate time to implement them or the activities will not be undertaken. This process has been initiated but needs continuous reinforcement through meetings, written procedures and communication. Responsibility for using standard tools and procedures needs to be incorporated into job descriptions of both the research and communications teams.

Goal #4: The Communications, Advocacy and Information Department and the Research Department share a sense of ownership in AREU's research and its effective communication, and to that end have established effective relationships before, during and after research projects are completed

A. Ensure regular meetings take place between communications department staff and research teams so that they are mutually informed about each other's work, including in the lead-up to events such as workshops and presentations

B. Research and communications team members engage in activities planned to build each other's capacity

Inter-departmental meetings need to be consistently held and focused on better coordinating and planning the communication of research, from early in the research process to final events. These meetings will help communications staff to better understand new and ongoing research and research staff their communication roles. Key will be for the teams to develop a discipline and practice of including each other and building each other's capacity.

Core Strategy 3: Broaden access to information to foster an environment of reflective thinking and public dialogue, and continuously improve the quality of AREU research outputs

AREU's ability to inform and influence policy and practice is partly dependent on policymakers' and influencers' access to and use of AREU's research outputs. The outputs' accessibility in terms of format, length, language and dissemination channels and their quality determine their effectiveness. Improving accessibility and quality is therefore an important focus of this strategic planning period.

The AREU library is an important part of AREU's resource base and a useful centre for national and international users to gain access to hard-to-locate information from or about Afghanistan. Its role within AREU and externally will be enhanced in this planning period.

Goal #1: Increase the visibility of AREU's research

- A. Increase the effectiveness of the dissemination of AREU research through a variety of accessible hard-copy formats*
- B. Increase the effectiveness of the means used to disseminate soft-copies of AREU's research products*

AREU's publications are the most visible and durable output of its research. To disseminate these documents as widely as possible in order to encourage their use, AREU will improve its targeting of hard-copy distributions in Afghanistan and explore different means of disseminating outputs in soft-copy. Relationships with membership organisations will be expanded, enabling both increased scope and geographic reach of hard-copy distribution. Distribution numbers and downloads will be monitored to assess progress. Targeting hard-copy distribution (currently hard-copies are distributed to about 1,000 individuals/institutions) may mean a reduction in the total numbers of papers sent out, but the papers received should better match individual or institutional interests.

- C. Augment dissemination of AREU's research findings through regular oral presentations to a variety of audiences*

To foster greater access to AREU's research findings and to expand AREU's relationships with policymakers and influencers, more effort will be made to disseminate research through oral presentations. These may involve soliciting feedback on research designs or findings, holding discussion forums, running seminar series or hosting workshops. AREU's outreach database will document expanded efforts in this area; see benchmark above.

Goal #2: Improve the accessibility of AREU research products (publications and the website) for all user groups, and monitor through gathering feedback from all types of users

- A. Redesign the AREU website to better attract and meet diverse and changing user needs, particularly of the Dari and Pashto pages, and monitor usage*
- B. Adjust the length and types of publications, and periodically evaluate their effectiveness in response to user needs*

Redesigning AREU's website and continuously reviewing and updating AREU's publication portfolio are critical functions to enhance research use and impact. This involves strengthening mechanisms to regularly solicit feedback to understand research users' needs, in all three languages. The website redesign will happen in 2010, and will include ways to receive user feedback.

- C. Continue to improve translation quality and targeting through monitoring and feedback from users*

Translating publications is important to increasing research use and accessibility. However, decision-making about AREU's translation strategy is difficult due to the challenge of getting consistent, detailed feedback from Dari and Pashto readers. Efforts will continue to obtain this feedback, as well as to continue current efforts to improve translation quality.

- D. Maintain and improve publication quality, both layout and printing*

AREU's recent shift to printing all papers in Kabul was an important investment in local development. However, this has come with challenges in maintaining print quality that require careful management and new contracting procedures. AREU's internal quality control measures related to layout and editing will be continuously reviewed and updated to ensure the consistent quality of AREU's research outputs.

Goal #3: Reposition AREU's library as one of AREU's core functions

- A. Increase the visibility, accessibility and utility of AREU's library to diverse users*

AREU's library is a core asset contributing to AREU's public profile and supporting a culture of research in Afghanistan; web-based use from 2008-09 has increased at an extraordinary rate (2,124 hits for the month of January 2008 compared to 5,239 hits for 14 days in October 2009). Efforts will be made over the next three years to promote it further through making more users both aware of it and able to use it. AREU research staff will also be encouraged to liaise with library staff when seeking written resources and planning engagements with the local research community. Improved access through the website can increase visibility and usefulness, and the range and number of publications acquired in Afghanistan can be increased to benefit users. Currently over 11,000 titles are held, approximately half in English and half in Afghan languages.

- B. Maintain and increase the networking roles of the AREU library and library staff*

The library is a significant networking hub within AREU because of the number of outside agencies contacting library staff, either to use the library or donate materials. The strong informal networks AREU's librarian has with researchers, including Afghan researchers across a variety of organisations, makes the library a natural leverage point for strengthening engagement with the broader research community within Kabul for the benefit of AREU's research. Efforts will be made to maintain and exploit this role for the benefit of other AREU work areas.

Core Strategy 4: Strengthen AREU's enabling environment (structure, policies, approaches and competencies) to build capacity of staff at all levels to advance AREU's current and future work reflecting its core values

Central to this core strategy is establishing a more coherent, integrated AREU capacity-building strategy, with dedicated staffing and resources, that improves understanding and supports progressive staff development and career advancement for all. Key to effective capacity building will be understanding and acceptance by staff of their mutual roles and responsibilities in the process, and recognising that in-house efforts and participation in short-term courses cannot replace exposure to academic training in contexts which build critical thinking and analytic skills.

More inclusive decision-making and organisational communication processes enrich decisions and build understanding across the organisation. Ensuring that all staff are aware of and uphold AREU's core values in their work, and that policies and procedures are measured against these standards, will similarly contribute to maintaining a positive working environment.

Goal #1: All staff have opportunities, and are motivated, to build their capacity to successfully assume increased responsibilities, and pursue their careers

A. Establish a coherent, integrated capacity building strategy for all staff that supports progressive professional growth through self-learning, organisational initiatives, mentoring and coaching

The aim of this objective is to ensure capacity-building efforts effectively contribute to improved job performance, systematically build the required competencies for assuming increased responsibility and, where desired, progressively build competency to support career advancement at AREU. Ensuring a realistic balance between work demands and capacity-building activities is maintained, that all understand the range of ways capacity can be developed and the limits to what can be achieved without formal academic training, and that "capacity builders" have the requisite coaching/mentoring skills are key challenges for this strategy to address. Evidence of staff promotions will show progress against this objective and the others under this goal (10 staff were promoted in 2007 and 12 in 2008) as will the numbers of staff participating in training opportunities (12 in 2007 and 28 in 2008).

B. Improve understanding and opportunities for staff across all departments to assume increased responsibilities and be eligible for promotion

For staff to have maximum clarity on professional advancement opportunities at AREU requires effective use of the revised performance appraisal system. Ensuring competencies are clearly defined in job positions, and the possibilities for progressive job positions are articulated along with the related necessary core competencies, are useful steps to undertake. Clarifying promotion opportunities and the eligibility of national staff for all positions in AREU, if core competencies are met, will be reinforced. Identifying with staff their career interests, outlining a career development plan and annually reviewing progress are all key activities to be strengthened through development of AREU's human resource unit.

C. Staff are increasingly accessing diverse and relevant capacity-building opportunities, both internal and external to AREU, that systematically build capacity

This objective involves implementing the revised capacity-building strategy to enable staff to engage in a range of capacity-building initiatives tailored to their and AREU's needs. Possible elements of this may include developing a dedicated capacity-building function to support staff efforts to identify capacity-building opportunities and systematically sharing learning and experiences related to on-the-job training, coaching and mentoring.

D. Identify and implement new ways to recognise staff achievement and progress, to increase motivation and improve retention

The focus of this objective is on developing non-financial means that give status and recognition to individual efforts.

Goal #2: Increase the inclusiveness and transparency of AREU's decision-making processes

A. Ensure that increased inclusiveness is practically realised in as many AREU decision-making processes as feasible

Inclusiveness contributes to increased understanding, trust and respect. To achieve this objective, focus will be on mapping the types of meetings in the organisation, determining where collective decision-making can be enhanced and expanding participation to those with contributions to make and whose exposure may further build their capacity. With participation comes a responsibility to actively participate and to be held accountable for decisions taken.

B. Improve staff comprehension of organisational decisions through improved documentation and dissemination of organisational decision-making meetings

Developing simple formats to document decisions and follow-up actions for all meetings for easy comprehension by participants and non-participants will help staff to be informed, seek clarification and provide their feedback on decisions proposed or taken. This will help build understanding and buy-in as well as improve institutional memory.

Goal #3: Maintain a positive working environment reflecting AREU's core values

A. Increase awareness of all staff of AREU's core values through orientations, workshops, meetings, etc.

Documenting and disseminating AREU's core values in multiple forms will help to maintain awareness of them. Being recognised and held accountable through the performance review system and recognised organisationally for exceptional demonstration of positive behaviour are effective mechanisms to promote these values and maintain a positive working environment.

B. Establish a mechanism that can advise, and if necessary arbitrate, on staff complaints and concerns

To maintain a healthy working environment in which criticisms are constructively made, complaints and issues are aired and resolutions are found requires effective and neutral advice and arbitration mechanisms that are trusted and respected by all staff. This role will be included in the review and restructuring of AREU's human resource unit.

C. Improve communication within and between departments that increases mutual respect and builds trust

All six core strategies require increased collaboration and coordination between departments and units in order to deliver improved services. Increasing interactions of a more informal form that build relationships and increase cross-cultural understanding are initiatives that can further build respect and trust.

Core Strategy 5: Strengthen administrative and financial support services to increasingly enable staff to assume more responsibility, and to improve organisational efficiency and accountability amidst heightened security conditions

AREU's administrative and financial support services are the base for all of AREU's other operations. They play a vital role in AREU's efficient, effective and safe operations and in strengthening accountability structures.

Goal #1: Increase access to and flow of financial information that improves programme and organisational decision-making and ensures accountability

- A. Strengthen the frequency and consistency of financial reporting to support more informed decision-making*
- B. Maintain financial flexibility, devolve budget management responsibility and accountability to programme levels to improve management efficiency, and secure adequate resources*
- C. Strengthen internal controls and accountability*

Extending access to financial information to senior managers, along with budget management responsibility, is part of decentralising decision-making to improve efficiency. These new responsibilities must be coupled with capacity building in accurate and accountable budget use. New financial management software systems may facilitate improved reporting and budget disaggregation; these must be implemented with appropriate staff training. Finally, AREU's existing internal control systems should continue to be monitored and strengthened to maintain AREU's reputation for fiscal prudence.

Goal #2: Build an expanded human resources unit in AREU that consolidates and assumes increased responsibilities, monitors learning and promotes improvements in HR systems and procedures

- A. Based on assessed needs, organisational implications and available resources and capacities, develop and roll-out a strategy for phasing in an expanded HR unit*
- B. Institutionalise and monitor the implementation of AREU's promotion policy*
- C. Expand and adjust AREU's orientation programme to effectively cover both national and international staff, keeping pace with organisational developments*
- D. Systematically implement, learn from and improve AREU's performance appraisal system*

AREU's growth has come with a need for improved human resource management systems and a unit capable of assuming collaborative responsibility for these duties. This change will provide managers currently responsible for HR functions in their teams more time to devote to other strategic activities, and will improve the consistency and effectiveness with which human resource policies and procedures are applied across the institution. This is particularly needed to manage the implementation of AREU's new performance

appraisal system. The unit would also provide more consistent monitoring of capacity-development aims and opportunities and manage staff expectations in these areas. Assessing the appropriate structure and responsibilities of this unit, along with the capacity development needs of HR staff, are key priorities. These will be addressed in the first year of the planning period through having an external human resources and capacity building assessment done. This will result in a detailed report with recommended changes, including a plan to implement the changes.

Goal #3: Increase access to, reliability and speed of ICT services to staff, both in Kabul and in the provinces

- A. Improve the current functionality of the ICT system to standards of speed and reliability comparable to similar organisations*
- B. Establish a system that regularly reviews and adjusts the ICT system based on organisational needs, resources and technological advancements*
- C. Develop the internal capacity of ICT staff and users to ensure efficiency in the use of ICT resources*

Goal #4: Strengthen security awareness, adherence and preparedness in support of AREU's work

- A. Improve the delivery, awareness and adoption of security recommendations, policies and procedures, both organisationally and among individual staff*
- B. Assess and adopt appropriate means to maintain a low profile amidst efforts to increase AREU's visibility and critical voice*
- C. Maintain relationships that assure AREU is secure, supported and impartial, both in Kabul and in the field*

Core Strategy 6: Implement strategies and mechanisms to sustain AREU's development, and systematically monitor and evaluate AREU's progress against its strategic goals and objectives

AREU has had a stable and robust presence in Afghanistan since 2002. However, its own growth and the unpredictability of the operating environment highlight the need for more strategic thinking about organisational sustainability. This entails developing practices which ensure, as much as possible, that AREU's presence endures.

Goal #1: To strengthen AREU's funding base to ensure adequate funds are available to support ongoing and future operations and take advantage of new opportunities, in forms which ensure AREU's independence

- A. To continue to diversify AREU's income sources through maintaining current funding relationships, building new funding relationships and exploring new income-generating options*
- B. To ensure AREU's operational budget is fully funded and that a significant share of available funds are undesignated*
- C. To continue to identify strategies to reduce AREU's short- and long-term operating costs*

A solid financial base is central to AREU's ability to be responsive to new opportunities and to maintain and enhance the quality of its work. This requires attention to expanding AREU's income sources. While donor funds will remain AREU's primary income source due to the nature of its activities, new donor relationships must be built as well as alternative

funding mechanisms, such as an endowment, explored with support from the Board. Expanding AREU's income sources must not jeopardise its independence; therefore the goal is to maintain a minimum of 60% of AREU funding as undesignated. AREU must also plan its activities with future funding possibilities in mind, to ensure all operations can be supported. This involves continuing to carefully manage growth and operating costs, including the balance between national and international staff levels. An appropriate benchmark is to have no more than 15% international staff during this planning period, down from just over 20% in late 2007/early 2008.

Goal #2: To position AREU within the Afghan legal and institutional context for sustainable growth

- A. To clarify, build and strengthen institutional relationships of value to AREU's long-term future*
- B. To continue to monitor GoA legislation and to pursue compliance*

Goal #3: To begin to re-orient AREU as an Afghan organisation

- A. To provide more opportunities for Afghan staff to take on publicly-visible roles, such as in networking, engagement and media relations*
- B. To position more Afghans in posts responsible for institutional decision-making and agenda-setting through internal advancement and external recruitment strategies*

AREU is currently best described as an "Afghanistan-based" research institute, not an "Afghan" one. Its medium to long-term aim is to change this perception and reality through progress in raising the visibility and authority of Afghans in the organisation. This requires well-defined capacity-development strategies focusing on research, communication and management skills, clear promotion policies and recruitment strategies to attract Afghans with advanced degrees.

Goal #4: To increase AREU's capacity to learn and to respond strategically to its operating environment

- A. To annually review progress toward meeting strategic goals and objectives, including assessing the current internal and external operating environment and how it affects future planning*

The main monitoring mechanism for the strategic plan is achievements against AREU's annual plans. AREU will review progress against its strategic goals and objectives in its annual planning processes, looking back at the previous year's achievements and shortfalls to develop the next year's plan. This effort will sustain progress toward the priorities in the strategic plan, and therefore AREU's continued institutional development.

- B. To enhance and further institutionalise systems to maintain AREU's institutional memory*

AREU generates knowledge through its research and develops and refines internal policies and procedures through its process of organisation growth. Both of these sources of information define AREU and must be better preserved to support institutional learning and sustainability. AREU will create electronic archives for its body of primary data, following strict confidentiality norms, and will document changes in policy and procedures to enhance understanding of AREU's institutional development.

Appendix 1: AREU's history

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit was formed in February 2002, when the assistance community in Afghanistan determined that the Strategic Monitoring Unit (SMU), created in 1998 as part of the United Nations' Strategic Framework for Afghanistan, would be more effective as an independent policy research institute. The SMU had been formed to "help the assistance community measure progress against the Afghan government's strategic objectives" and to document "how principles are being applied on the ground." In the rush of activity and enthusiasm of the post-Taliban era, the assistance community clearly saw the critical need for an independent, reflective body. Since that time AREU has been operating based in Kabul, with support from a Board composed equally of United Nations, NGO and donor representation.

The original rationale for AREU remains as important today as in 2002, namely that the lack of reliable data and analysis is a critical issue for the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan. In addition, the tyranny of expectation of quick results and for everything to happen at once has often pre-empted much-needed reflection, analysis and learning. Policymakers and practitioners in Afghanistan and abroad continue to base their decisions on untested assumptions, with unfortunately predictable results. In fact, the political pressure for quick solutions to long-term problems, along with the high volume of funding earmarked for reconstruction, the increased number of interested actors and the heightened expectations of the Afghan population all indicate the need for deeper reflection, analysis and learning.

AREU has grown significantly over its eight-year history. Over this period it has established itself as an independent and well-respected institution, and as a key player in the reconstruction and development of Afghanistan.

Appendix 2: External stakeholders consulted

To capture external stakeholders' perceptions of AREU including its strengths, challenges, threats and areas to improve, seven individual interviews and one focus group discussion were conducted. The participants are listed below.

Individual Interviews:

- 1) Najib Amiri, National Programmes Coordinator – Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
- 2) Najla Ayubi, Technical Advisor – The Asia Foundation
- 3) Zuhra Bahman, Lecturer – American University of Kabul
- 4) Khwaga Kakar, Coordinator – Centre for Policy and Human Development
- 5) Mohammad Hossain Emadi, Senior Policy Advisor – Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock
- 6) Ahmad Zia Entezar, Reporter and Producer – IRIN
- 7) Jen Rowell, Advocacy Coordinator – Care Afghanistan

Individual ex-AREU staff Interviews:

- 1) Shelly Manalan, Research Officer, March 2007 to May 2009
- 2) Ibrahim Mahmoodi, Support Officer to Director/Research, July 2006 to November 2008
- 3) Saghar Wafa, Research Assistant/Sr. Research Assistant, March 2004 to August 2008
- 4) Marie Louise Hoilund-Carlsen, Research Officer, September 2007 to December 2008
- 5) Marieke Denissen, Sr. Research Officer, July to December 2008

Core Donor Focus Group Discussion

- 1) Nazar Ahmad Shah, Embassy of Denmark
- 2) Abdul Bari, SDC
- 3) Maliha Said, Embassy of Finland
- 4) Sirajuddin Khalid, Embassy of Sweden
- 5) Vanessa Shade, DFID
- 6) Leo Thomas, DFID