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Sida Decentralised Evaluation

FCG Sweden, Tana Copenhagen

Evaluation of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, strategy period 2019–2021

Final Report

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**Final Report
July 2022**

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The views and interpretations expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AAN	Afghan Analysts Network
AMIP	Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace
ANPDF	Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
AUAF	American University of Afghanistan
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
CEDAW	Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CPAN	Chronic Poverty Advisory Network
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EITI	Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative
EMT	Executive Management Team
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council, United Kingdom
ET	Evaluation Team
EU	European Union
EVAW	Elimination of Violence Against Women
FMIC	French Medical Institute for Children
GCRF	Global Challenges Research Fund
GDPO	Global Drug Policy Observatory
IDP	Internally Displaced People
IDS	Institute for Development Studies
IEA	Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan
IFRS	International Financial Reporting Standards
IRA	Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
LFA	Logical Framework
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPP	National Priority Program
NUPI	Norwegian Institute of International Affairs
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD-DAC	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Assistance Committee
RAB	Research Advisory Board

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies
ToR	Terms of Reference
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Mission to Afghanistan
USIP	United States Institute of Peace
WFP	World Food Program

Preface

This evaluation was contracted by FCG through the Sida Framework Agreement for Evaluation Services and conducted by Tana Copenhagen.

The Evaluation Team consisted of Cécile Collin, Julian Brett, and Malek Sitez. The draft Final Report was quality assured by Ingela Ternström, whose work was independent of the evaluation team.

The Evaluation Team would like to thank the management and staff of AREU for their support during the evaluation.

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings and recommendations of an independent evaluation commissioned by Sida of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) covering the period from 2019 to 2021. AREU is a Kabul-based independent research think tank established in 2002 with the assistance of the international community in Afghanistan, including Sweden. Its mission is to inform policy and practice by conducting high-quality, evidence-based research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. The evaluation has assessed the performance and results of AREU during this time, including what has worked well and what has worked less well. It is both summative and formative; looking back at what AREU has achieved and looking forward to what options are available in the short to medium term given the dramatically changed political context. Sida's most recent core support agreement was signed in 2018 and ended in December 2021, coinciding with AREU's strategic plan for the same period.

The evaluation has employed a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative assessment of data from a range of different sources, including primary sources and secondary sources (including AREU's own documentation, procedures, reports, and research documents). This fed into an evidence-based analysis that involved triangulation of data from multiple sources. A total of 39 individuals were interviewed, including Sida staff, AREU management and researchers, members of the former Afghan Government, Afghan civil society, international human rights organizations, and AREU cooperating partners and researchers. These included individuals currently in Afghanistan and outside. No interviews were conducted with members of the de facto government. No field research was undertaken in Afghanistan due to the security and logistical difficulties associated with this.

Summary of key findings

The evaluation finds that AREU and the thematic focus of its activities have been relevant to the context and development needs in Afghanistan during the evaluation period, as well as international priorities, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This relevance is demonstrated by AREU's research agenda, which has included natural resource management, governance and political economy, social protection, gender, migration and regional cooperation, and constitutional law – all of which featured in Afghanistan national development strategies. These themes are very broad, which provides AREU with considerable flexibility to pursue research funding that meets its priorities and opportunities that may arise.

The evaluation finds that AREU is an effective organization and produces research of a high standard that has contributed to increasing knowledge and policy in the areas covered. Its domestic standing in Afghanistan during the period is demonstrated by its generally positive interaction with the former Afghan Government, civil society and academic institutions, as recounted by many of the stakeholders interviewed. Internationally, AREU has regularly featured amongst the top research institutes in international rankings (in 2020, it was ranked 3rd in Central Asia in the Global Think Tank Index). Its reputation is also demonstrated by the ability to partner with counterparts in Europe and elsewhere; indeed, a substantial part of AREU's work has been produced in partnership with international research institutions and this provides important opportunities for AREU in the future.

AREU's performance against the objectives and targets in its strategic plan is generally good. Results for 2019 and 2020 show that the majority of targets were either met or exceeded (in some cases significantly exceeded). There were, however, also areas where no or only limited progress was made. These mainly concern organizational enhancements, such as the proposed Research Advisory Board and the establishment of a gender center. AREU's performance was affected by the onset of COVID-19 and continued deterioration in security, both of which lowered results in 2020 and 2021. The evaluation also notes that many of the targets have been relatively unambitious and the results reported are not consistently aligned to the indicators and targets in the results framework. This means that the reporting fails to provide an accurate overview of AREU's contribution to change in Afghanistan and amongst its stakeholders. AREU's results planning and reporting would therefore benefit from a greater focus on outcome effects (for example, the uptake and use of research).

The evaluation finds that AREU has an important role to play in strengthening Afghan capacity for research and a number of AREU researchers have developed professionally within the organization; for example, by moving up from research assistant positions to full researchers. Other Afghan actors consulted, however, expressed some regret that AREU was not doing more for the wider Afghan research community; for example, through cooperation with Afghan universities, where there was a wish for a more visible and concrete AREU role.

AREU has taken a proactive approach to ensuring that research findings are disseminated nationally and internationally by organizing events and inviting key stakeholders, including policy makers, international community, donors, CSOs and media. It disseminates its research findings using a variety of on and offline media in English, Dari and Pashto, thereby making its work accessible to both Afghan and international audiences. Consideration could be given to developing a "flagship product" providing a regular update on particular themes.

The evaluation assessed both the research quality and the quality of translation of a number of AREU publications and found both to be good. Research products are peer reviewed, often by international experts. In some sectors, however, a substantial

amount of the research has been produced by the same international authors for over a decade, illustrating long term dynamics of partnerships and capitalization but also the importance and reliance on those experts. The evaluation finds that there would be merit in increasing the visibility of Afghan researchers, whether as sole authors or within mixed Afghan/international teams.

The evaluation assessed AREU's treatment of gender, human rights & equity, conflict sensitivity, environmental, and poverty issues, which are also Sida's five cross-cutting perspectives. The first two perspectives feature strongly in AREU's values and ethics and all are represented in AREU's strategic plan to varying degrees.

The evaluation finds that AREU has had impacts in accordance with its theory of change and expected results at an intervention level but that wider effects are difficult to ascertain. There is evidence that AREU has influenced the former government's policy in certain areas, particularly gender and water. There is also evidence that AREU has contributed to public discourse on its research topics, although this appears to mainly concern stakeholders (civil society, students, academics) already active within the fields discussed. However, the sustainability of this development has now been placed in question by the Taliban takeover.

Finally, the evaluation notes that Sida's core support has been an increasingly important due to its predictability and the flexibility it offers. While part of the funding is used for research production, it also acts as a "gap filler" to enable overall AREU operations. However, this reliance also poses longer term risks for AREU's sustainability. AREU needs to continue to solicit funding from a variety of sources, ideally long-term and in partnership with international counterparts. To achieve this, it is essential that AREU maintains its high research quality standards.

Summary of recommendations

To Sida:

1. Continue to provide core funding to AREU, considering its professionalism and ability to work in the evolving Afghan context, its role in supporting research in Afghanistan, and provision of research on essential topics for both Afghan stakeholders and the international community.
2. Provide technical support to assist AREU in the design of the strategic framework and objectives.
3. Use AREU research to inform other interventions and synergies between its various projects.

To AREU:

4. Increase the involvement of Afghan stakeholders in the Board and the establishment and implementation of the Research Advisory Board.

5. Consider developing new services, including a flagship product, and new skills of interest to both Afghan and international stakeholders.
6. Strengthen further the capacity building of Afghan researchers, in terms of transfers of skills between international researchers and Afghan researchers, and the development of new skills for which AREU is well positioned given the evolution of the context.
7. Strengthen further the consistency of the strategic framework and definition of the objectives in the different themes, and related monitoring and evaluation system, while keeping it easy to use and adaptable in view of the current context.
8. Ensure the mainstreaming of the cross-cutting issues throughout the research, beyond specific targeted analyses. This is particularly relevant to gender, equity, and conflict.
9. Continue to engage pro-actively with donors, international partners, and other sources of funds to strengthen the medium-term funding base, including scope for core funding in addition to Sida.
10. Strengthen further the activities and partnership at the local level, in the different regions of Afghanistan to increase the coverage of the most remote and isolated areas, and involvement of stakeholders in the regions, provinces, including universities and civil society, and at local level.
11. Continue a flexible, neutral, and low-profile approach in the new context. Risks have been well managed to date but the context remains highly uncertain. Ensuring that AREU is closely entrenched into the local tissue of society (also outside of Kabul) while keeping a research approach useful to a broad range of stakeholders, remains key.

1 Introduction

This document is the final report of an evaluation of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), covering the period from 2019 to 2021. The evaluation has assessed the performance and results of AREU during this time, including what has worked well and what has worked less well. The evaluation includes findings and recommendations that we hope can positively influence future interventions. It is both summative and formative; looking back at what AREU has achieved and looking forward to what options are available in the short to medium term given the dramatically changed political context.

AREU is a Kabul-based independent research think tank established in 2002 with the assistance of the international community in Afghanistan. Its mission is to inform policy and practice by conducting high-quality, evidence-based research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning. During the period evaluated, AREU has sought active engagement with policymakers, civil society actors, researchers, and the development assistance community in Afghanistan and elsewhere to promote their use of AREU's research publications and its library, strengthening research capacity and creating spaces for analysis, reflection, and debate. It has continued to function since the Taliban takeover in August 2021.

The intended users for this evaluation are primarily Sida's unit for Afghanistan, the Swedish Embassy in Afghanistan, AREU and its board members. Other stakeholders include partners and other donors of AREU. With the recent developments in Afghanistan in mind

1.1 BACKGROUND, PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE EVALUATION

Sida has provided support to AREU for almost 20 years. The most recent core support agreement was signed in 2018 and ended in December 2021, coinciding with AREU's strategic plan 2019-2021. Following the changes in Afghanistan in August 2021, AREU developed an interim strategy (for 2022). Sida has also adjusted its support following the Taliban takeover, the introduction of sanctions, and the revised EU policy on Afghanistan. As such, both Sida and AREU are adjusting to the new circumstances, which are themselves evolving.

The purpose of the evaluation is to provide Sida and AREU with an assessment of the results and progress in the strategic plan period 2019-2021. The evaluation will be used to inform decisions on how AREU's operations may be adjusted and how to improve the use of Sida's funding, its links to AREU's projects, and how to achieve the (new)

interim strategic plan's goals and objectives. The primary intended users of the evaluation are Sida, the Swedish Embassy, AREU and its board members.

According to the Terms of Reference (ToR), the evaluation objectives are to:

- Evaluate the implementation of the strategic plan 2019-2021 with regard to its vision, mission, overall objectives and theory of change. The evaluation should formulate recommendations on how AREU can improve and adjust implementation.
- Evaluate AREU's organization and implementation in a complex working environment and formulate recommendations as input to the preparation of AREU's new strategic plan.

The scope of the evaluation is limited to AREU as an organization and its implementation of the strategic plan 2019-2021. The evaluation also takes account of the changes since August 2021 and provides input regarding AREU's strategic positioning in this regard.

1.2 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The report includes an overview of the context since 2019, the methodology used to conduct this evaluation, an overall presentation of AREU. Key findings are then structured based on the evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact. Finally, the report present considerations related to the short-medium term approach, conclusions, and recommendations.

2 Context

AREU currently finds itself in a vastly different political, security, economic and social environment compared to that pertaining in the first two and a half years of the strategic planning period and preceding years. The changes have had significant implications for how AREU operates and the scope of its work during the later months of 2021 and to date.

During the period 2001-2021, the international community supported Afghanistan's reconstruction after the previous period of Taliban rule with massive financial, military, humanitarian, and development contributions. Development support underpinned the development agenda outlined in successive national development policies (notably the 2017 Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) and its National Priority Programs (NPPs). In November 2018, the Afghanistan International Conference in Geneva reaffirmed Afghanistan's development commitments in line with the SDGs, inter alia prioritizing efforts to: reduce/eradicate corruption; improve the situation of women; improve human rights; provide for the return of refugees; food security and livelihoods; regional connectivity and infrastructure.¹

While progress was uneven, Afghanistan's democracy progressed over the past two decades. Three presidential and three parliamentary elections were held, the role of women in government, the private sector, civil society considerably increased, education expanded (especially for girls), civil society and independent media actors developed and were active. Freedom of speech was promoted and a dynamic platform with research and discourse-driven institutions was established. The culture of research, analyzing, and holding the government and other national and international actors to account was strengthened. In this environment, independent institutions such as AREU were able to develop and interact with a broad range of national and international stakeholders, including government.

Notwithstanding these achievements, Afghanistan's political institutions continued to suffer from a lack of political culture and capacity. Political parties were affiliated with illegal, armed, ethnic and regional leaders. Security and access progressively worsened, escalating with the withdrawal of international forces. Warlords gained political, economic, and social power and became institutionalized. Corruption broadened to all sectors of the state apparatus.² The Kabul Bank corruption case in 2010 cost the government and Afghan people 1 billion USD.³ Individuals within the security, justice, agriculture, transport, public administration, and parliamentary sectors were involved in significant corruption cases. The immense logistics set-up required to maintain

¹ Geneva Conference on Afghanistan, Communique, November 2018

² According to Transparency International corruption index 2020, Afghanistan ranked sixth in the World. <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2020/index/afg>

³ Grant McLeod, "Responding to Corruption and the Kabul Bank Collapse," United States Institute of Peace, December 2016, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR398-Responding-to-Corruption-and-the-Kabul-Bank-Collapse.pdf>

security also became a source of corruption for organized crime within the political system.⁴ The political system was frequently criticized by civil society and human right actors due to corruption and lack of respect for the rule of law. According to Transparency International, Afghanistan was (and remains) ranked as one of the most corrupt states globally.

Concurrently, the Taliban increased their presence and exploited the gap between society and the government. They attracted young Afghans who could not find any possibility of being productive in society.⁵ In parallel, the international community was also losing its patience. The United States negotiated with the Taliban directly (bypassing the then Afghan Government), leading to release of Taliban fighters and continuing progressive military drawdowns and ultimately the complete withdrawal of U.S. and other international military forces in the summer of 2021. The withdrawal seriously damaged Afghan politicians and soldiers' political and military morale and credibility.⁶ Government-Taliban peace negotiations also took place in Doha.

Since its takeover, the Taliban has announced the second Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA), based on Sharia law.⁷ It is a state dominated by the extremist Haqqani network, but also including traditional Taliban and more moderate reformists. The government is 100% male and 94% Pashtun. The de facto government suffers from a lack of national legitimacy and development has halted due to the cessation of international development funding, an escalating humanitarian crisis, and significant brain drain. The international withdrawal operation in August 2021 evacuated 170,000 Afghan contractors, civil society actors, human rights/women rights activists, intellectuals, and former officials from Afghanistan. In parallel, refugees rushed to neighboring countries, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, India, Central Asia, and the Russian Federation.

The consensus is that security has improved, although it remains fragile. Tragic incidents and terrorist operations during Ramadan have killed more than 100 people and injured 200 in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif and Kunduz. The attacks by the Islamic State terrorist group represent a direct challenge to the Taliban rule. Hence, it is difficult to be sure of security and stability in the current situation. There are also allegations of arbitrary detentions and extra-judicial killings.

There is also a legal vacuum in the state structure. The Taliban have adjusted their laws to Islamic jurisprudence, contrary to modern law. They have organized the Ministry of Promotion of Islamic Laws in a restricted manner to monitor the people's behavior in society. The 2004 constitution and major legislation have been paused, undermining previous progress on inclusion of women and minorities.⁸ In the absence of a new constitution, the political structure in Afghanistan is uncertain. There is no parliament or independent court system. Ethnic minorities are not represented in the political system.

⁴ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report, October 2021

⁵ Civil Society and Human Rights Network www.cshrn.af

⁶ It should be noted that the bulk of forces were withdrawn starting much earlier (~2012), and that it was only a very limited number of troops (and contractors) who were withdrawn in summer of 2021.

⁷ The first IEA was announced in 1996-2001 after the Mujahedeen regime.

⁸ Association of Lawyers of Afghanistan, November 2022

Under pressure from international sanctions, the banking system is barely functioning. Unemployment has considerably increased and there are shortages of food prompting a humanitarian crisis. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 20 million Afghans need food, and 2 million Afghans are in a disaster condition of hunger and poverty. Lack of IEA recognition by the international community restricts the emergency support to Afghan people, although international actors (including bilateral actors) are re-engaging with humanitarian and, to a lesser extent, development assistance.

The international community has not recognized the IEA, and the government has the status of a de-facto regime. The UN Security Council's preconditions for recognition of the government are a) IEA should respect the fundamental human rights of Afghans, including free movement. b) IEA should respect women's rights and women's political participation c) IEA should organize an inclusive national government with active participation of all ethnic groups and religious groups. d) IEA should guarantee that terrorists do not use Afghanistan territory for terror operations.⁹ According to recent analysis, the extension of Taliban-specific sanctions to the Afghan state, the significant reduction in non-humanitarian aid, and the freezing of Afghan state assets are contributory causes of the Afghan economy's freefall. In response, the Taliban appear to be abandoning previous attempts towards broad compromises in exchange for normalization of relations and taking a transactional approach.¹⁰

On 17 March 2022, the UN Security Council extended UNAMA activities for another year, opened the humanitarian aid corridor to Afghanistan and left the ground for political negotiations in Afghanistan. Some governments, such as Qatar, Turkey, and Central Asian governments, are trying to encourage the Taliban to meet international community preconditions. But there seems to be a difficult path ahead.

During the evaluation period, Afghanistan's capacity for independent and quality research has strengthened but remains extremely limited and AREU is one of the few Afghan institutions capable of producing research of good quality. AREU improved notably over the years its coverage, organizational processes and the capacities of researchers, notably Afghan ones. Research is almost entirely internationally funded. UNESCO's 2019 regional assessment places Afghanistan's scientific research output slightly above Bhutan but considerably below all other regional counterparts, with a high percentage of co-authorships (81%). This reflects the low capacity of Afghanistan's higher education system (tertiary enrolment was 9.7% in 2017). Despite increases in the number of research grants made available by the then Afghan Government, research at universities and higher education institutions has been practically non-existent and there have been very few Masters and PhD programs.¹¹ This situation is even more acute since the Taliban's return and the academic brain-drain resulting from it.

⁹ United Nations Security Council Debate on the Fall of Afghanistan, 30 August 2021 <https://www.c-span.org/video/?514366-1/united-nations-security-council-debate-fall-afghanistan>

¹⁰ Crisis Group. Stopping state failure in Afghanistan. 27 January 2022

¹¹ UNESCO Science Report, South East Asia. 2019.

3 Methodology

3.1 OVERALL APPROACH

The evaluation team has used a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative assessment of data from a range of different sources, including primary sources and secondary sources (including AREU's own documentation, procedures, reports, and research documents). This fed into an evidence-based analysis that involved triangulation of data from multiple sources.

In accordance with Sida evaluation guidelines, the evaluation has been based on the OECD-DAC Evaluation Quality Standards in a manner that corresponds to the complexities of this exercise, namely the strategy period and conflict-affected implementation environment. The evaluation has thus been conducted in a manner that is as inclusive and participatory as possible.

A total of 39 individuals were interviewed through on-line methods (typically either Zoom or Teams). These included Sida staff, AREU management and researchers, members of the former Afghan Government, Afghan civil society, international human rights organizations, and AREU cooperating partners and researchers. These included individuals currently in Afghanistan and outside. The evaluation team did not conduct any field research in Afghanistan due to the security and logistical difficulties associated with this.

The evaluation has been time-sensitive in the sense that it has examined the period of AREU's 2019-2021 strategic plan. In some cases, interviewees did not restrict themselves to this period and reflected upon their knowledge and experience of AREU going further back as well. In all aspects, care has been taken to ensure that the safety of respondents has been upheld, and that no risks have been involved in supplying feedback to the evaluation. This has included a commitment to preserve the anonymity of respondents.

The evaluation has been quality assured: this has included quality assurance of data collection design, tools, and process, quality assurance of data, quality assurance of reports as well as quality assurance of data integrity. The focus has been on ensuring accuracy, validity, comprehensiveness, and usability in line with the ToR.

3.2 METHODOLOGY

The main evaluation tool has been the evaluation matrix developed from the overarching evaluation questions provided in the ToR. This identified specific questions, sub-questions, indicators, and data sources. The matrix is aligned with the

OECD-DAC criteria, and uses the OECD-DAC definitions of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and impact as stated in the ToR.

During data collection, all team members used the same tools for the data collection to ensure that all areas were covered and that there is consistency in the application of the methodology. Data collection tools such as the interview guide were based on the evaluation matrix. The questions were tailored to specific groups of respondents (e.g., AREU staff, AREU management, donors, international partners/civil society) in order to ensure that all aspects were covered to a reasonable degree. Responses from interviews were written up and shared amongst the team to serve as a background tool for the drafting of the report. They will not be shared beyond the team to ensure anonymity of interviewees.

Key informant interviews were undertaken with a wide range of stakeholders, as mentioned above. These were selected partly based upon recommendations from AREU and partly through the team's own contacts. The selection was driven by the team's interest in accessing a broad range of stakeholder groups.

The team undertook an assessment of research quality based upon a review by Dr. Malek Sitez (academic team member) and interviews with relevant actors, including local and international researchers, human rights defenders, civil society networks, Afghan universities, journalists, and other experts, including former government's stakeholders.

The data collected has been analyzed through a deductive approach where AREU's performance has been assessed through a) desk analysis of relevant organizational publications, reports, and outreach activities, including budgets, plans, accounts, audits and M&E framework, b) targeted questions based upon the interview guides.

We have undertaken a quantitative assessment of certain aspects of AREU's performance (such as staffing, budgets, research outputs, and outreach) where data and baselines are available. We have tested emerging findings through triangulating evidence from multiple sources (typically two or more key informants coupled with documentary evidence). Our emerging findings were presented to AREU senior management and the AREU Board. AREU (and Sida) have also had an opportunity to read and comment on this evaluation report.

3.3 EVALUATION CRITERIA AND QUESTIONS

The evaluation has utilized selected OECD evaluation criteria, as suggested in the ToR; these being relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and impact. It has also been guided by the evaluation questions in the ToR, as summarized in the table below. The full evaluation matrix used by the team is at Annex 2.

Evaluation criteria	Key evaluation questions
Relevance: Is the intervention doing the right thing?	<p>To what extent has the intervention objectives and design responded to beneficiaries', global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies, and priorities, and have they continued to do so when circumstances have changed?</p> <p>To what extent have lessons learned from what works well and less well been used to improve and adjust intervention implementation?</p>
Effectiveness: Is the intervention achieving its objectives?	<p>To what extent has the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives, and its results, including any differential results across groups?</p> <p>Has the M&E system delivered robust and useful information that could be used to assess progress towards outcomes and contribute to learning?</p>
Efficiency: How well are resources being used?	To what extent has the intervention delivered, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way?
Impact: What difference does the intervention make?	To what extent has the project or program generated, or is expected to generate, significant positive or negative, intended, or unintended, high-level effects with special consideration to Sida's five perspectives?

The team has also analyzed several cross-cutting issues throughout the evaluation, in particular: poverty, human rights, environment and climate, gender equality, and conflict. These correspond to Sida's five perspectives. In addition, the team has assessed the degree to which AREU has responded to the recommendations of the previous Sida evaluation (in 2013) and it has considered possible short- and medium-term steps that AREU could take in response to the new political situation in Afghanistan.

3.4 ETHICS AND PARTICIPATION

The evaluation team has prioritized research ethics and duty of care, including conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm in line with Tana's ethical guidelines. The team took great care in contacting and interviewing Afghan stakeholders still in Afghanistan and arrangements for this were discussed with AREU and outlined in the inception report. All potential key informants were identified jointly by the team and AREU and their contact details were passed directly from AREU to the team. This ensured that AREU only passed details of people whom they knew to be accessible. All interviews were conducted on the basis of informed consent and interviewees were informed that their identities would be protected in the evaluation report. As a consequence, this report does not include a list of persons interviewed.

3.5 LIMITATIONS

The evaluation team wishes to draw attention to several limitations, primarily concerning data collection. Because the team was unable to travel to Afghanistan and there was a highly dispersed stakeholder group, remote interview techniques (using Zoom, Teams, etc.) were used throughout. While the majority of interviews were conducted in English, a small number were also undertaken in Dari. All interviews were written up and shared amongst team members.

A second limitation is that opportunities to talk to former government officials was limited (although a number were consulted) and there was no interaction between the team and the current *de facto* authorities. The team was cautious in accessing stakeholders in Afghanistan and all contacts were first agreed with AREU's leadership and AREU had an opportunity to alert informants that they would be approached by the team. At the outset of each interview, it was explained that inputs would remain anonymous, and that the interviewee was under no obligation to answer any question that made them uncomfortable. In practice, all interviews proceeded smoothly, and respondents were forthcoming with useful information.

Do No Harm considerations precluded the team from undertaking a survey and focus group discussions, as would normally be the case for an evaluation of this type, although the team has accessed a stakeholder survey undertaken by AREU in 2020.

The forward-looking aspects of the evaluation were constrained by uncertainties relating to AREU's future status and role. AREU's scope of work has adjusted to reflect the new conditions, but there remains considerable uncertainty about their medium- and long-term effects. The report's forward-looking aspects therefore are based upon AREU's current expectations regarding the short and medium term.

Despite these constraints, we consider that sufficient primary and secondary data has been collected to support the evaluation's findings and recommendations. We consider also that the quality of the data collected during those interviews, notably with AREU staff and key partners, was good and ensured drawing solid findings and conclusions.

4 Evaluation Object

4.1 THE AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION UNIT

AREU's vision is:

AREU envisions an Afghanistan where policy decisions are made on the basis of evidence, open debate and widespread public awareness in the belief that this will better reflect the priorities of the Afghan people and give rise to more informed policies and programs.¹²

AREU's mission is to inform policy and practice by conducting high-quality, evidence-based research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning.

As an independent, non-profit and non-partisan Afghan-led institute, our mission is to inform policy and practice and produce knowledge by conducting high quality research to nurture a culture of research and learning in Afghanistan and stimulate demand for evidence-based research.¹³

This mission is supported in the Strategic Plan by a brief theory of change which is essentially (our interpretation) that *if* robust evidence-based research is conducted, *then* public discourse and policy decisions will be stimulated, *because* citizens' views, opinions and everyday realities are provided and accounted for. Please see Chapter 5.2 of this report for a discussion on the theory of change. As also described in the Strategic Plan, the mission is to be achieved through active engagement with policymakers, civil society actors, researchers, and the development assistance community in Afghanistan to promote their use of AREU's research publications and its library, strengthening research capacity and creating spaces for analysis, reflection, and debate.

4.2 AREU RESULT AREAS

AREU's objectives and expected results are outlined in the Strategic Plan and comprise eight goals and 25 objectives. The goals are at a strategic level while the objectives are more operational. Six of the goals (Goals, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8) are inward looking and concern the capability of AREU to deliver research and other outputs, one of the goals (Goal 4) concerns partnerships, and one (Goal 1) is externally focused on nurturing evidence-based decision-making. The eight goals are:

¹² AREU Strategic Plan, 2019-2021, p. 11

¹³ *ibid*

1. Goal 1 – Nurture evidence-based decision making
2. Goal 2 – Strengthening the quality and scope of AREU’s research
3. Goal 3 – Strengthen AREU’s communication and dissemination strategies and products
4. Goal 4 – Develop and sustain mutually-beneficial partnerships
5. Goal 5 – Ensure quality internal management and administrative processes within AREU
6. Goal 6 – Develop a strategy for ensuring organizational effectiveness
7. Goal 7 – Strengthen the human resource capacity and representation of AREU staff
8. Goal 8 – Strengthening the quality of research and dissemination of findings.¹⁴

The goals and objectives are also included in a Log Frame (LFA) describing the intervention logic (and including indicators, assumptions and risks). In addition to the goals and objectives, the LFA includes seven external and internal specific objectives. These have slightly different wording and indicators to the other objectives, although they nonetheless cover the same areas.

The specific objectives are:

1. External SO 1 - Contribute to evidence-based decision-making
2. External SO 2 - Strengthen the quality and scope of AREU research
3. External SO 3 - Strengthen AREU’s communications and dissemination strategies and products
4. External SO 4 - Develop and sustain mutually-beneficial partnerships
5. Internal SO 1 - Ensure the quality of internal management and administration processes
6. Internal SO 2 - Develop strategy for ensuring organizational sustainability
7. Internal SO 3 - Strengthen human resource capacity and representation of AREU staff.¹⁵

In addition, concrete targets are provided for all goals are provided in a separate matrix (labelled “goal specific outcomes”) across the three-year strategic period.

Finally, AREU has utilized annual action plans that identify various performance areas (e.g., enhanced organization sustainability, enhanced policies/procedures for management) against which specific actions and indicators are set. This also includes a security risk action plan and monitoring matrix.¹⁶ The relationship of this action plan to the LFA mentioned above is not direct as the action plan has more of the character of a check list of actions to be taken than a strategic planning tool illustrating interlinkages and overall intervention logic across the activities.

¹⁴ AREU Strategic Plan, 2019-2021

¹⁵ AREU Strategic Plan, 2019-2021

¹⁶ AREU Annual Plan, Fiscal Year 2019

4.3 AREU MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING

AREU is headed by a director (Dr. Orzala Nemat), who is currently based in the United Kingdom. Day-to-day management on the ground in Afghanistan is provided by the EMT and an Acting Director who are based in Kabul. In 2021, AREU's staff numbered 37 in total (12 researchers, 7 administrative and 18 support personnel) with a 73%/27% (M/F) gender split, including all the support personnel (guards, cleaners and drivers).

Internal management and coordination are provided by an Executive Management Team (EMT) comprising senior management. The members of the EMT are as follows: AREU Director, Communications and Advocacy Manager, Research Manager, Research & Donor Coordinator, a representative from the Operations Team, which includes the Finance Manager, Senior HR Officer, and the Admin Manager. The ToR for the EMT note that its members play an advisory role, and it is the Director or, in his/her absence, the Chairman of the Board that takes decisions. The EMT meets on a bi-weekly basis.¹⁷

Above this, AREU is governed by a Board of Directors comprised of eight representatives from embassies (3), the United Nations and other multilateral agencies (1), Afghan civil society (1), and independent experts (3). The ToR for the Board note that its function is to provide oversight and technical guidance, review and approve the strategic plan, annual operating plan and annual budget, review and approve the audited accounts, assist in fundraising efforts, and recruit the AREU Director. The Board meets quarterly.¹⁸

4.4 FUNDING AND DONOR SUPPORT

AREU has an annual budget during the evaluation period of USD 1.6 million in 2019, USD 1.96 million in 2020, and USD 1.5 million in 2021 with a split between the program and support budgets of 61%/39% (2021 figures).¹⁹

Sida is AREU's only core donor, contributing around 32% of AREU total funding in 2019 increasing to 58% in 2021. Other funds are exclusively project-related and come through grants either directly to AREU or through its cooperation partners, which include: the European Union (EU), United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Overseas Development Institute (ODI-UK), School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) and Economic and Social Research Council United Kingdom (ESRC-UK), UN-Women, Save the Children, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), and the University of Essex, amongst others.

AREU's financial management systems apply International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS), and annual accounts are independently audited each year.

¹⁷ AREU EMT, Terms of Reference

¹⁸ AREU Board Terms of Reference

¹⁹ AREU annual operation budgets, 2019-2021

5 Findings

5.1 RELEVANCE

The evaluation team has assessed AREU's relevance to the Afghanistan context, the former Afghan Government's development priorities, Sida's strategic priorities, and Sida's five mandatory perspectives (gender, conflict, human rights, environment, and poverty).

5.1.1 AREU's relevance to Afghanistan's development needs

The evaluation team find that AREU and the thematic focus of its activities have been relevant to the context and development needs in Afghanistan during the evaluation period.

This relevance is demonstrated by AREU's research agenda, which has included natural resource management, governance and political economy, social protection, gender, migration and regional cooperation, and constitutional law – all of which featured in Afghanistan national development strategies (ANPDF) and other commitments made at international development conferences on Afghanistan. Based on these, government institutions developed sectoral strategies, policies and development programs. Our interviews and the documentation show that AREU has incorporated a large part of this development agenda in its strategy and related research activity.

Overall, there was consensus amongst our interviewees that the resultant prioritization was relevant. AREU's work in the fields of the rule of law, transitional justice, constitutional reform, gender, livelihood opportunities, returnees and internally displaced (IDPs), and natural resource management, the functioning of the Afghan Parliament and the independence of the judiciary, and concerning groundwater and surface water research of Kabul were all mentioned by our interviewees as research that has been relevant, in addition to social and economic development (including in rural areas), women's empowerment. We note that the above themes are very broad, and their precise scope is not described in AREU's strategic plan, which provides AREU with considerable flexibility to pursue research funding that meets its priorities and opportunities that may arise. Also, while the formulation of the themes is quite broad, research within them is focused on specific aspects (for example, groundwater, poppy cultivation, etc.). These aspects are also relevant. However, the focus means that there are likely to be other areas of the overall themes that remain unresearched or under-researched, notably in relation to the level of funding.

Interviews with Afghan stakeholders noted that weak political will, weak government capacity, corruption, as well as the deteriorating security situation and the impending

international military withdrawal, were major challenges for the former government and seriously constrained the scope for progressive policy making during the evaluation period. The resulting lack of balance between policies, plans and the reality of everyday lives amongst the population led Afghan civil society to be highly critical of the former government's performance. In this environment, AREU's evidence-based research has provided discreet yet relevant policy contributions to reduce the policy vacuum within the areas researched.

AREU's research priorities have meant that some possible areas that would also have been relevant to the context have *not* been selected (an example is research on political processes). AREU management noted that the decision not to research political areas was influenced by the desire to remain politically neutral, the logic being that this would allow AREU greater freedom to operate in the areas it *did* wish to research in. Some Afghan interviewees mentioned other themes that they said were relevant, but that AREU had decided not to prioritize (examples mentioned included social justice, ethnicity, corruption). On balance, however, the range of possible research areas is so wide that there will inevitably be gaps and the fact that the majority of AREU's national and international stakeholders found the research focus to be relevant is positive.

AREU informed the evaluation team that the main thematic research priorities are developed through in-house consultations (involving staff, management, and the Board) but have generally run on from previous periods. This continuity has allowed AREU to develop (and maintain) its research capacity, to develop relations with parts of the government machinery and thereby contribute to evidence-based policy development and enter into cooperative partnerships with other research institutes (mainly international). Within the overall thematic areas, AREU has entered into partnerships with international research institutes and sought project funding. The detailed research agenda is thus also opportunity driven.

A further dimension of domestic relevance concerns AREU's role in capacity development of Afghan researchers. In 2014, Afghanistan's Higher Education Development Project prioritized the improvement of university teaching and development of a research culture; inter alia, through improvement of higher education infrastructure and research grants. There are various ways to which AREU contributes to this, including by developing in-house researchers through project work, mentoring, research seminars, development of research methodologies, interaction with other Afghan and international researchers, dissemination of research findings through workshops, presentations, and social media. Many of these aspects are covered in AREU's annual reports and through its homepage.

In the current fragile and stressed environment that we describe in the context section, AREU is able to continue to operate, albeit with a reduced level of activity and visibility, and remains relevant. A number of our interviewees expressed the view that at least some parts of the Taliban administration understand the role that research can play in supporting governance and this offers potential for AREU to continue to operate provided it avoids politically or religious contentious issues. The same interviewees

confirmed that the research priorities outlined in the interim strategy are likely to be relevant (i.e., humanitarian assistance, natural resource management, economic issues, and social protection and livelihoods).

5.1.2 Relevance to international and regional strategies

The evaluation team finds that AREU's work is relevant to a number of international development and human rights commitments. The focus on gender has been relevant to equality and women's rights and women's empowerment undertakings, including UNSCR 1325 (2000), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Examples include research published on the implementation of the 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law; on women's access to micro-finance; on women's participation in the peace process; on women's political participation; and the impact of COVID-19 on women. AREU's website includes 47 entries on gender related issues.

The focus on natural resource management has been relevant to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (1994) and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) (2003), of which Afghanistan is formally a member. Examples of AREU's research in the area include papers on water and irrigation; food security; poppy cultivation; extractive sector governance; and agriculture. We note, however, that two themes continue to dominate AREU's work in this area, these being water management (21 entries) and the narcotics industry, with a focus on farmers and rural livelihoods (33 entries).

The evaluation team finds that AREU's work has been relevant to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs form a specific reference point for the 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, which states that "AREU will also aim to align its research and evaluation work alongside SDGs across thematic areas with a view that in the near future at least one study per relevant theme is conducted in reviewing the SDGs each year".²⁰

Table 1: Overview of research areas and SDGs²¹

AREU Research area	Applicable SDGs
Natural resource management	SDGs 1, 5, 6, 7, 13 & 15
Social protection	SDGs 2,3, 4, 5 & 10
Governance and political economy	SDGs 8, 9, 11, 12, 16 & 17
Gender	SDGs 5 & 10
Migration and regional cooperation	SDGs 8, 11 & 17
Legal and constitutional	SDGs 10, 16 & 17

International cooperation with Afghanistan has decreased strongly since August 2021 and interactions between international stakeholders and the de facto authorities are

²⁰ AREU Strategic Plan, 2019-2021, p. 13.

²¹ AREU Strategic Plan, 2019-2021, p. 14-17

challenging and very limited. All governance related interventions stopped in the country. At the same time, the basic needs of the population have escalated. In this context, AREU has a rather unique positioning; it has a significant potential role as a local capacity that is able to maintain some level of analysis on public policies related issues, notably on issues of interest for the international community and for the Afghan population, such as access to natural resources, basic services and livelihoods. This relevance may increase with the current international focus on emergency relief, to which AREU may be able to contribute with research promoting the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP or triple) nexus.

5.1.3 Coherence with Sida strategies

The evaluation team finds that the support has also been relevant to Swedish priorities. Sweden's strategy during the period has prioritized peaceful and inclusive societies; human rights, democracy and the principals of rule of law; gender equality; education and health; and inclusive economic development and sustainable livelihoods with a focus on the environment, climate, and sustainable natural resource management. AREU's research agenda touches on all of these priorities. We note that research is not explicitly mentioned in the Swedish strategy; however, the strategy is also sufficiently broad to accommodate it under Sida's engagement.

With regard to Sida's five perspectives, we find that all are covered to some degree by AREU's research and that AREU is therefore relevant to them. In particular, the Swedish priorities on gender and the environment are strongly aligned (please see section 5.2.4 where the five perspectives are discussed in more detail).

Sida's project portfolio in Afghanistan during the evaluation period has included areas where AREU has been active; however, the team did not identify many specific linkages and synergies between AREU's work and other Sida projects and interventions. The main exception to this is some limited engagement by AREU with the Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace (AMIP) at the beginning, including in terms of providing specific baseline data in projects. This finding should not be regarded as a criticism of AREU. Instead, it suggests that Sida could do more to link up its interventions to exploit possible geographic and/or thematic synergies.

As of end of 2021, Sida's cooperation strategy with Afghanistan was adjusted and limits the possibility to contribute to building the capacity of the de facto authorities, while still allowing possibilities to conduct advocacy work, demanding accountability or peacebuilding activities.²² The reorientation also includes specific attention to mechanisms to protect the provision of basic services, potential off-budget support on non-discrimination and human rights in the implementation of the activities, and reinstating that no form of support may be provided that would institutionalize discrimination or violate human rights or risk contributing to radicalization or

²² Guidelines and pre-conditions to be applied by Sida in Afghanistan, until further clarification of the situation on the ground or additional guidance by the Swedish Government

dissemination in conflict with human rights. AREU appears to be currently working within the limits of prescriptions.

5.2 EFFECTIVENESS

Effectiveness concerns the degree to which an intervention's objectives have been met. The evaluation team has therefore assessed: a) the results that AREU has achieved during the period evaluated and where there were aspects that could not be achieved as planned and why; b) the difference that activities have made to beneficiaries and whether certain groups have benefited more (or less); c) the quality of AREU research and the extent to which AREU has improved the process of producing high quality research in Afghanistan; d) factors that have either facilitated or hindered the achievements of the expected results; and e) possible positive or negative indirect effects. In addition, we have assessed how various cross-cutting issues been applied (especially gender, human rights and equity, conflict sensitivity, and environment) and the results from this.

Overall, the evaluation team finds that AREU is an effective organization and produces research of a high standard that has contributed to increasing knowledge and policy in the areas covered. Its domestic standing in Afghanistan during the period is demonstrated by its generally positive interaction with the former Afghan Government, civil society and academic institutions, as recounted by many of the stakeholders we interviewed. AREU has regularly featured amongst the top research institutes in international rankings (in 2020, it was ranked 3rd in Central Asia in the Global Think Tank Index). AREU's international reputation is also demonstrated by its ability to partner with counterparts in Europe and elsewhere and it has a long tradition of utilizing respected international researchers together with Afghan researchers. As one of AREU's international partners phrased it, "AREU's advantage is that they have legitimacy and can engage with communities."

5.2.1 Results achieved

The evaluation team has assessed AREU's performance against the objectives and targets in its strategic plan using the annual reports as a source as they include a summary of results against the targets in each "outcome" area (see Table 2 below). The results for 2019 and 2020 show that the majority of targets were either met or exceeded (in some cases significantly exceeded). In many cases, this positive trend was also apparent in the first half of 2021. There were, however, also areas where no or only limited progress was made. These mainly concern organizational enhancements, such as the proposed Research Advisory Board and the establishment of a gender center.

Table 2: Summary of AREU results according to outcome area

Outcome area	2019	2020	2021 ²³	ET comment
Generate 15 research publications per year				On target when considering translations. 2021 result affected by August events
Foster evidence-based decision-making				Weak indicator. Dissemination & interaction with Afghan stakeholders significantly reduced after August 2021
Inform Afghan government policy through AREU's evidence-based research				Standardized briefings/dissemination. Result significantly reduced after August 2021
Inform national and international program design and implementation				Standardized briefings/dissemination
Influence stakeholders' research and funding priorities				Standardized briefings/dissemination
Develop new research protocols and publication platforms to rapidly assess emerging trends or relevant thematic areas				In line with target. Interim strategy developed end 2021
Broaden the scope of AREU's research focus, geographic coverage and methodological approaches				Reduced access in 2020 & 2021 due to insecurity & COVID-19
Generate research funding from needs-based approaches rather than donor driven agenda				In line with target
Increase dissemination of and access to AREU research, particularly outside Kabul				Improved website had positive effect
Demonstrate AREU value as a resource for technical advice and expertise				Requests from GoA until August 2021. Continued interaction with international institutes.
Develop outreach and education strategy for Afghan university engagement to				MOUs in 2020 stalled due to new GoA

²³ 2021 results are provisional. Results were significantly affected by declining security situation and then by Taliban takeover. Nb. Reporting not fully in line with the indicators but nonetheless provides information on performance within the area concerned.

Outcome area		2019	2020	2021 ²³	ET comment
	train students, build research capacity, disseminate research findings				procedures and COVID-19 restrictions & not possible after August 2021
	Strengthen and expand partnerships with international and Afghan research organizations				Strong international and national partnerships
	Demonstrate organizational commitment to using internal monitoring (LFA)				On target
	Improve internal communication and coordination and build greater awareness of internal programming and research				On target
	Improve dissemination and adherence to internal management processes				Odd indicator (no cost extensions)
	Identify and obtain contingency funding or operational reserves				50% success rate from proposals
	Develop and disseminate security and operational contingency protocols				On target
	Improve staff retention through increase technical training, job advancement, etc.				On target. Training not possible after August 2021
	Enhance internal capacity of national staff to take on research design, writing and analysis				Variety of internal training events. Slightly less in 2020. 2021 indicates continued increase in Afghan lead authors
	Sustain and promote gender equality				Reduced gender balance in staff due to COVID-19
	Legal studies center				No progress in 2020 due to the lack of financial resources to maintain research
	Paula Kantor gender studies center				Limited progress due to risks and deterioration in security
	Organize annual AREU conference				On target
	Establish Research Advisory Board				No progress due to multiple reasons: COVID-19, Security and major shifts since last August.

Outcome area	2019	2020	2021 ²³	ET comment
Seek regional partnerships				Affected by COVID-19 in 2020 & 2021 and security situation

Result significantly above expectations	Result in line with expectations	Result below expectations

The evaluation team notes that AREU's performance was affected by the onset of COVID-19 and continued deterioration in security, both of which lowered results in 2020 and 2021. For example, the 2020 annual report shows that COVID-19 caused a reduction in the gender balance in the organization. It notes that this was due to female staff not being replaced following the COVID-19 recruitment freeze. Security constraints restricted AREU's ability to meet its target of working in 70% of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. In 2019, it worked in half of the provinces. In 2020, it was only 4.²⁴

While wishing to acknowledge the overall progress during the evaluation period, the evaluation team notes that the results reported are not consistently aligned to the indicators and targets in the results framework. Examples of somewhat misleading results reported include publications (outcome 1) where the target was 15 publications a year (three per thematic area). The 2020 annual report states that AREU succeeded in delivering a total of 32 publications in 2019 and 37 in 2020. However, in practice, many of these publications were translations (English, Dari, Pashto) of the same report and that the actual amount of "new" research produced was considerably less (in fact just on target – 16 distinct publications in 2020).²⁵ A further example is outcome 7 which concerns "broadening the scope of AREU's research focus, geographic coverage and methodological approaches". However, the indicator refers only to geographical coverage (at least 70% of Afghanistan's provinces) and the actual results were well below this (50% in 2019 and 12% in 2020). These anomalies suggest that AREU should in future ensure that indicators and reporting reflect the scope of the outcome (or that the outcome is defined differently).

The above means that the reporting fails to provide an accurate overview of AREU's contribution to change in Afghanistan and amongst its stakeholders. The evaluation team finds that AREU's results planning, and reporting would therefore benefit from a greater focus on outcome effects (for example, the uptake and use of research). We also note that many of what are reported as outcomes are in fact outputs (i.e., actual deliverables from AREU, such as the number of reports and interactions with policy

²⁴ AREU Annual Report, 2020

²⁵ This is evident from Annex 3 and 5 of the 2020 Annual Report, where the publications and languages are listed.

makers). Indeed, we have a number of further observations and suggestions relating to the LFA in Section 5.2.4 below.

The performance of the main areas of intervention of AREU according to the different strategic goals and outcomes and the related logical framework are analyzed further in this chapter on effectiveness and also in the chapters on efficiency and impact that follow.

5.2.2 Performance of the M&E system

The evaluation team finds that AREU's results framework (LFA) and the outcome matrix generally provide measurable indicators that can be monitored and reported upon.²⁶ Specific logframes have also been designed for each department, with specific criteria and targets. Reporting on these uses quantitative data, generally with a good correspondence to the indicators. However, there are also a number of shortcomings in comparison with internationally accepted standards for results-based management.

Comparison of the reporting with the objectives, indicators and targets in the general results framework shows varying degrees of alignment, as already mentioned. Moreover, all objective (outcome) statements are in fact worded as activities (using active verbs) where they should ideally reflect an end-state (result achieved). As a consequence, the LFA reads like an action plan rather than a results framework. To rectify this, it would be useful to differentiate between the output level (i.e., actual deliverables) and the outcome level (i.e., the effect or uptake of these deliverables), while activities (i.e. actions taken to produce deliverables) do not need to be included in the strategic plan. They are better placed in an action plan. The overall analysis of the progresses in the different thematic areas remains then quite limited.

We also note that certain of the indicators/targets appear quite modest and are process focused. An example is the indicator for outcome 2 which concerns evidence-based decision making where the indicator is establishing relationships with six policy makers. It is unclear exactly what "establishing relationships" actually entails as it could range from occasional meetings regular engagement and dialogue on policy. Another example is outcome 5 which concerns influence on stakeholders' research and funding priorities where the indicator is receipt of 10 invitations to present outputs. The difficulty with such indicators is partly that they do not provide strong evidence of a result and secondly that the target appears vague and possibly overly modest. The evaluation team recommends that AREU reworks its objectives, outcomes and outputs so that they correspond to a logical hierarchy contributing to the overall goals in the AREU vision statement and that indicators/targets reflect this hierarchy and include a realistic level of ambition.

5.2.3 Contribution to research production in Afghanistan

Outcome 10 of the AREU results framework concerns provision of technical advice and expertise and Outcome 11 concerns Afghan university engagement to build domestic research capacity, providing learning products, disseminating research

²⁶ AREU Strategic Plan, 2019-2020

findings, and augmenting faculty curricula. The annual reports provide examples of where AREU has been approached by Afghan (and international) higher education and research institutions, networks, and government departments. We also note from our interviews with AREU researchers that a number of them have developed professionally within the organization; for example, by moving up from research assistant positions to full researchers. Other Afghan actors consulted, however, expressed some regret that AREU was not doing more for the wider Afghan research community; for example, through cooperation with Afghan universities, where there was a wish for a more visible and concrete AREU role.

AREU disseminates its own research findings using a variety of on and offline media in English, Dari and Pashto, thereby making its work accessible to both Afghan and international audiences. Publications include: newsletters, briefing papers (circa 20 pages), issues papers (circa 64 pages), working papers (circa 45 pages), policy notes (circa 4-6 pages), and case studies. As the overview in Table 3 below illustrates, the majority of publications are in all three languages and around half are authored by Afghan researchers. The publications in some sectors have also been produced mainly by the same international authors for over a decade, illustrating long term dynamics of partnerships and capitalization but also the importance and to some extent reliance on those writers for AREU's publications. In 2020, out of 13 publications, four were produced by the same international writer – apparently without co-author. While our interviewees spoke very highly of this research, the prominence of a single international author adds to the perception amongst some Afghan stakeholders of AREU being a “donor driven organization”. In the current context, we find that this may be counter-productive for AREU and that there would be merit in increasing the visibility of Afghan researchers, whether as sole authors or within mixed Afghan/international teams. Obviously, in the current context the visibility of researchers should depend on the specific security risks and challenges.

Table 3: Summary of AREU publications in 2020²⁷

Title	Type of publication	Thematic area	Language	Lead author
Taxation, the pre-requisite for statebuilding	Briefing paper	Governance, political economy	English	Afghan
Technology and humanitarian aid	Working paper	Social protection	English	International
A-Z Guide to assistance in Afghanistan	Background document	Governance, political economy	English	Afghan
Can the Afghan state intervene in conflict between nomads and settlers	Policy note	Natural Resource Management	English, Dari, Pashtu	International

²⁷ AREU Annual Report, 2020 supplemented by AREU website data

Title	Type of publication	Thematic area	Language	Lead author
Surface-groundwater interaction in Kabul	Issues paper, Policy note	Natural Resource Management	English, Dari, Pashtu	Afghan
The Helmand Food Zone	Issues paper, Policy note	Natural Resource Management	English, Dari, Pashtu	Afghan
When the water runs dry	Briefing paper	Natural Resource Management	English, Dari, Pashtu	International
When the water runs out	Issues paper, Policy note, Synthesis paper	Natural Resource Management	English, Dari, Pashtu	International
Gender alert on COVID-19	Newsletter	Gender	English	
Mules, pick-ups and container traffic	Issues paper	Governance, political economy	English, Dari, Pashtu	International
Women's participation in the peace process	Case study	Gender	English, Dari, Pashtu	Afghan
Catapults, pick-ups and tankers	Issues paper	Governance, political economy	English, Dari, Pashtu	International
Solidarity, strength and substance	Issues paper	Gender	English, Dari, Pashtu	International
In war, no-one distributes sweets	Report	Governance, political economy	English, Dari, Pashtu	Afghan

In 2020, AREU commissioned an online survey of its NGO/CSO stakeholders to determine their views on the relevance of AREU's work, which is also a noticeable good practice and illustrates the positioning of AREU as a service provider to Afghan organizations. The survey was launched via the AREU website, so it was not specifically targeted, and the number of respondents was relatively low (50). This low response rate needs also to be seen in relation to the monthly number of visitors (around 20,000) in 2020 (of whom over 95% are referred to as new visitors).²⁸ Nonetheless, the survey results show that 54% of respondents described themselves as regular readers of AREU publications and 78% reported that they found AREU's research to be relevant or very relevant. Moreover, 68% of respondents stated that they had used AREU's research and recommendations in their own work, with the most often cited uses being in project/program design, in business development, and in workshops and trainings. Advocacy was not mentioned. The research in the areas of Natural Resource Management, gender, social protection/livelihoods, and governance/political economy were reported as the most popular. The most used thematic is Natural Resources

²⁸ AREU Analytics, Audience Overview, All website data, Jan. 2020 - Dec. 2020.

Management. Respondents also mentioned several themes of specific interest such as the impact of CSO/ NGO work, elections, education, natural resources, cultural heritage, extractive industry, health, technical and vocational education, and training (TVET), the Intra Afghan talks, and regional cooperation.

While the above results should be caveated due to the low number of respondents and the method of catchment, they do nonetheless generally mirror the responses that the evaluation team received from its direct interviews with the Afghan and diaspora CSO/NGO community. International research institutes and human rights activists who were consulted by the team also reported that they regularly draw from AREU research and that, where AREU research themes coincide with their own, AREU is considered by them to be a credible and trusted source. This view was also confirmed by a former member of the Swedish Embassy in Kabul.

Some interviewees mentioned that skills still needed to be built or supported further on research methodologies, such as quantitative analysis and economic impact assessment, on which AREU has limited experience. These aspects appear to be of specific interest in the current context where international organizations have limited access to the ground and basic needs amongst the population have increased, suggesting that socio-economic trends and impact of possible interventions should be documented, including for advocacy purposes. This leads us to suggest that there would be value in AREU and its partners considering the scope for a flagship product published annually to provide consistent and comparable data over the years in prioritized sectors. The current “A-Z Guide to assistance in Afghanistan” partially fulfils this role – and is well-perceived amongst AREU’s national and international stakeholders. However, a more research-based publication, such as a barometer, on the evolution of key trends drawing upon relevant selected indicators could be of specific interest for Afghan stakeholders and the international community.

5.2.4 Findings relating to research quality

Goal 2 is “Strengthen the quality and scope of AREU’s research” and Goal 8 is “Strengthen the quality of research and dissemination of findings”. The related outcome and indicators do not necessarily provide clear benchmarks though on the quality of the products and are mostly related to activities and processes.

Nonetheless, AREU is generally highly regarded for its ability to produce research of good quality. In 2020, the organization was ranked third (out of 58) in Central Asia in the annual Global Go To Think Tank Index.²⁹ Recorded citations of AREU reports amounted to 115 in 2019, 141 in 2020, and 78 in 2021 (of which 60 were from the period up to August 2021), representing a relatively consistent trend.³⁰

The evaluation team has reviewed a selection of AREU research products and finds them to be well structured, with a good introduction, clear summary, description of the research background, methodology, theory, antithesis, field and library research, data

²⁹ https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=think_tanks

³⁰ AREU data

and figures, etc., and clear analysis, recommendations and summaries. AREU researchers informed the team that there is a standard process for research production involving the following key steps: design of method, research questions, research plan (geography, target groups); kick off workshops with key stakeholders which provides an overview of method and research approach; develop questionnaires/interview guides – depending on target groups, do a pilot project (5+ test KIIs); conduct data collection, process and analysis; writing, review (internal and external peer review); finalize report; presentation and dissemination in English, Dari, and Pashto; place on website. All publications go through a standard pre-publication quality process.

Our interviews with Afghan and international researchers have confirmed the above findings. They also noted several possible reasons for the high quality of research products, including the capacity building of young researchers that has been promoted through periodic workshops on research methodologies, educational courses on research processes, and mentoring and collaboration between young researchers and senior researchers (including international researchers). The research mostly focuses on qualitative analysis while the capacity for quantitative analysis remains limited. This reflects a decision by AREU to focus primarily on qualitative research due to the difficulty of obtaining reliable quantitative data. International researchers consulted by the team noted that a strong comparative advantage is AREU's ability to undertake field research of a high standard on the ground in Afghanistan's provinces. The peer review process also contributes to overall quality. As noted in the 2020 Annual Report, this process can result in substantial changes being made (rewriting in some cases) in order to live up to international research standards.³¹

Although AREU's publications are readily available in the main Afghan languages, some of our Afghan interviewees voiced criticism of the quality of the Dari and Pashto translations of reports originally written in English. Language issues present a dilemma; AREU's international reputation (and funding) depends upon its ability to produce and disseminate reports of high quality in English. However, its credibility and relevance amongst Afghan stakeholders depends upon their ability to easily access and utilize the research developed.

In order to assess the validity of this criticism, we have reviewed a selection of AREU's publications and compared the Dari and Pashto translations against the English versions. In the cases examined, the English text is the primary document, and its research terminology and concepts are used accurately. Our review found that the quality of the Dari and Pashto versions was also good. The evaluation team does not therefore agree with the criticism voiced.

5.2.5 Cross-cutting issues

The evaluation team has assessed AREU's treatment of gender, human rights & equity, conflict sensitivity, environmental, and poverty issues, which are also Sida's five cross-cutting perspectives. The first two perspectives feature strongly in AREU's values and

³¹ AREU Annual Report, 2020. p. 11

ethics as described in the Strategic Plan where, for example, AREU describes itself as committed to working towards the public good in Afghanistan “through research that is reflective of and responsive to [the people’s] needs” and “ensuring a diversity reflective of the nation as a whole”.³²

Progress reports submitted to Sida do not specifically document the integration of cross-cutting issues as part of the strategies or projects, which also relates to the rather factual and descriptive nature of those reports (see below 5.3.4). The reports document nonetheless the gender division of the staff by type of position.

We also note that the AREU logframe includes specific indicators related to cross-cutting issues.

- On equity, indicator “7. Broaden the scope of AREU’s research focus, geographic coverage and methodological approaches based upon iterative reflections of past research findings and techniques.” refers to the geographical coverage of the research across the Afghan provinces. AREU staff interviewed stated that AREU made some efforts to try to access some challenging areas, including in the east of the country, but this was constrained by the security situation. A number of AREU studies cover provinces such as Nangarhar, Balkh, Nimroz, and Helmand. Several interviewees highlighted the importance of work at the provincial level, with easier access to some provinces with the change of regime, notably Pashtoun provinces.
- On gender, a specific logframe indicator concerns gender empowerment - 20. Sustain and promote gender equality and representation within the organization and improve within particular departments.” AREU staff indicated that various organizational processes are designed to support gender integration and equity. The recruitment process is open to all, advertised publicly, without restrictions related to ethnicity. However, they noted that the human resources policy does not make explicit provision on promotion of diversity and gender equality. Interviewees also indicated some challenges to find staff with the required qualifications, skills and experience out of Kabul, which has always been a challenge. Access to expertise will be further complicated considering the number of Afghans with higher educations who left Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover. Further partnership with universities and synergies with other organizations are then key for addressing this.

The evaluation team notes that the gender balance within AREU has decreased over the three years with the number of female employees going down from 31 in 2019 to 27 in 2021 of total staff.³³ As illustrated in Table 4 below, the division between women and men has remained fairly constant over the period, although there are clear discrepancies between women and men in the administrative and support categories. This challenge is likely to increase in the future unless the de facto authorities adopt a more moderate line on women’s presence in higher education and the workplace. Stakeholders interviewed mention also some difficulties in the previous years to attract

³² 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, AREU. p. 10

³³ AREU data

women to data collection in the field, notably because of cultural reluctances. Support includes guards and drivers, so not likely to be very female.

Table 4: AREU gender split

Year	Research		Admin		Support		Total	Total Female	Total Male
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male			
2021	5	7	1	6	4	14	37	10	27
2020	6	8	1	7	5	16	43	12	31
2019	7	9	2	7	5	15	45	14	31

Regarding Do No Harm and conflict sensitivity, specific references to those approaches are made in the logframe with references to specific approaches and methodologies designed for studies to take into account the specific sensitivity of the topics and interviewees. A specific logframe outcome, n°17, targets specifically conflict sensitivity “Develop and disseminate security and operational contingency protocols to guarantee continuity of operations in response to emerging political or security trends”. We note that AREU’s risk management systems (see Section 5.3.8 below) illustrate the conflict sensitivity approach to the interventions and the ability of the organization to operate in the sensitive and unstable national context.

In terms of results, gender (6 specific publications) and environment (7 specific publications) feature strongly amongst AREU’s research priorities and publications during the evaluation period. Gender-related research has included the impact of COVID-19 on women, the results of the 2009 Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, and a noticeable case study on men and masculinities, or Women’s Participation in the Afghan Peace Process, amongst others. Environmental issues are key features of the research on irrigation and groundwater. The natural resources management interventions also contribute to this cross-cutting theme, notably on land management between different social groups, therefore NRM is highly relevant. Specific research also concerns some categories of vulnerable, such as nomadic groups or IDPs.

Those aspects appear to a limited extent as cross-cutting themes in the research on other topics. In particular regarding gender, research on narcotics does not seem to mention the potential role of women in the poppy cultivation process. This has been addressed to a certain extent in the report: *When the Water Runs Out: The Rise (and Inevitable Fall) of the Deserts of Southwest Afghanistan and its Impact on Migration, Poppy and Stability*³⁴, with the challenge also of deploying female researchers in rural areas to collect the data. The same shortcoming appears in other research that we have examined, such as “Review of Functions of Government Agencies in Afghanistan”, “The Impacts of Water Sector Reforms on Agricultural Productivity in Afghanistan”, “Migration governance”, “Policy Research Institutions and Health Sustainable Development Goals: Building Momentum in South Asia” and gender aspects are very limited in the “Judicial review”

³⁴ <https://areu.org.af/publication/2006/>

Conflict is also a cross cutting theme of some of the research; for example, in relation to nomad-settler conflicts and also the interaction between the illicit economy and peacebuilding. Although AREU has generally steered away from researching the Afghan peace process, it has contributed to stakeholder consultations within the frame of the Afghanistan Mechanism for Inclusive Peace (AMIP) and undertook research on women's participation in the peace process. We find that AREU has the potential to contribute more on identifying conflict drivers through mainstreaming conflict more clearly in its work where conflict factors exist.

Poverty reduction and human rights are cross-cutting aspects of AREU's work, although they also feature independently to a limited extent within the Social Protection and Livelihoods thematic area, and the Natural Resources management. Poverty dynamics are directly tackled through various publications, including the COVID-19 monitor, Opportunities for Pro-Poor Agricultural Growth, Helmand on the Move: Migration as a Response to Crop Failure or Water rights and conflict resolution processes in Afghanistan. Some of our interviewees regretted that AREU did not focus more on human rights (aside from gender equality issues). Human rights are important, but during the early years, it was not considered an institutional priority because other, more specialized institutions were focusing on it.

5.3 EFFICIENCY

The evaluation team has assessed the degree to which AREU has delivered results in an economic and timely fashion. This has included assessment of the effectiveness of strategic planning, management and governance bodies, use of synergies and coordination, the organizational set up, and handing of risks.

Overall, the evaluation team finds that AREU has a well-established, inclusive and participatory management system and governance mechanisms. The strength and resilience of this is demonstrated by the organization's ability to maintain operations despite COVID-19 pandemic, the dramatic changes in Afghanistan since August 2021 and the presence of the AREU Director overseas for an extended period of time.

5.3.1 Strategic planning

AREU has a thorough strategic planning process that is led by the EMT, includes inputs from the Board, and involves all departments. As already noted, the 2019-2021 Strategic Plan provides an overview of AREU's vision and mission, and the steps foreseen whereby AREU will contribute to them. This clearly locates AREU as an Afghan organization with a focus on Afghan development issues while also resting upon values and identity that are very much rights based and non-partisan. AREU's core values are stated as being: flexibility and objectivity, resilience, accessibility, mutual respect and inclusion, and excellence. The Strategic Plan also has firm linkages to the SDGs.³⁵

³⁵ 2019-2021 Strategic Plan, AREU.p. 10

The Strategic Plan presents a clear pathway for AREU's development during the period. We find, however, that this leads it to focus extensively on internal capacity processes (6 objectives) compared to partnerships (1 objective) and external deliverables and results (1 objective). In other words, there is limited focus on AREU's wider effects, which are its *raison d'être* according to the vision and mission statements. This is not to suggest that the internal processes are not important – AREU needs to have the capacity to deliver. But we would argue that a stronger focus on the external intended effects or changes expected from AREU would help expose the steps and conditions necessary to produce these effects, detailed the different steps of the chain of results with key factor of success, assumption, underlying hypotheses and factors affecting the changes. This would allow clearer analysis when some parameters change, notably the context. The emphasis should be on the end result in line with AREU's overall vision, which is described as a) evidence-based policy and practice, b) open debate, and c) widespread public awareness.

The vision objectives are also reflected in AREU's theory of change, which does not include any assumptions (although it is based around an explanation of causality).³⁶ To be useful, theory of change needs to include statements relating to the contextual preconditions that need to be in place for change to occur (permission to conduct primary research, for example) as well as the assumptions underpinning causality higher up the results chain (why policy makers should take heed of the evidence presented, for instance). Making these factors explicit will enable AREU to monitor any changes that may occur and provide a basis for adaptive management. We find that, while such assumptions are implicit in AREU's management practices (through the use of the risk management matrix for example, there would be benefits in lifting them up to the strategic planning level, especially in the current context. For example, it may be that the current administration requires a quite different form of engagement than the previous government and that this will have implications for AREU's products and communications.

5.3.2 Implementation of the 2013 evaluation

The previous evaluation dates back 2013, so almost ten years ago. It brought a number of recommendations of which some are still relevant to date. We find that many of the recommendations have been addressed, although there are a few that are still outstanding, as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5: 2013 Evaluation recommendations

2013 Evaluation recommendation to AREU	Level of progress
1. Look into focusing its research pillars and developing a clearer approach to selecting its research topics. Research topics should take into consideration the issue of contextual relevance and	Unclear what changes have been made on the approach for selecting the research topics, which remain quite broad, but the relevance of the topics does not appear as an issue and

³⁶ AREU Strategic Plan, 2019-2020

2013 Evaluation recommendation to AREU	Level of progress
timeliness vis-à-vis the development needs of the country. It is important that the complementarity (and potential collaboration) with other research actors be kept in mind in this process.	AREU has a number of Afghan partners, although no real joint / common projects.
2. Improve access to its products, with an emphasis on (1) electronic media, including the internet, social media services (such as twitter and Facebook), and (2) enhanced use of printed outputs.	This recommendation was addressed through the development of social media and outreach approach
3. Finalize the revision of the communication and outreach strategy while maintaining the flexibility of adapting it to the requirements of specific studies. In this process, the library should be given due attention and adequate human and material resources should be factored into the implementation of the strategy.	No communication and outreach strategy identified, but AREU has all the relevant communication channels, including social media, and a monitoring of its outreach.
<p>4. While AREU already has a strong institutional identity, it could be strengthened and focused further. This includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new director of AREU should take the lead in promoting a joint understanding between, first and foremost, the board and the management on the organization's mission, vision, and priorities for 2014 onwards, and secondly, between the management and the staff of the organization. • Ensure that the discussion includes clear policies in relation to the following issues: consultancies versus/combined with research; degree of advocacy emphasis of the organization; how to maintain collaborative and supportive relations with the Government while still ensuring neutrality. • Similarly, the organization will need to redefine its role and agree on a manageable but meaningful approach to capacity development 	Partially addressed, the approach to capacity development among the broader Afghan audience could be developed further, plus development of partnerships with universities and other key Afghan stakeholders. This will also evolve given the complexity and volatility of the environment.

2013 Evaluation recommendation to AREU	Level of progress
<p>and promoting learning from research among the broader Afghan audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicating clearly on these issues with all relevant stakeholders. 	
<p>5. Maintain a high-level focus on overcoming the organization's recent management crisis. This includes continued efforts to implement the recommendations from previous audits and reviews, as well as continuing the process of developing the organization's results framework.</p>	<p>This appears to have been resolved, with limitations identified on the structure of the theory of change and logframe.</p>
<p>6. In support of (3) AREU should continue to implement the <i>Afghanisation</i> of AREU through strengthening of national staff's capacities and promotion of Afghan researchers. Similarly, the use of a substantial number of external researchers should only be continued in as far as the knowledge generated and methodologies applied can be institutionalized in AREU. Attention should be paid to potential and perceived conflicts of interest of senior staff and maintaining a (perception of) high level of independence and quality of the products produced by AREU.</p>	<p>Some progresses on capacity development but should be pursued further with clearer objectives and more systematic associations / credits of Afghan researchers, to limit the reliance on a few international researchers and ensure that all the resources identified in the list of staff are used. Further capitalization and transfer of knowledge could also take place on the methodological level, including further internal in-house training and increased involvement of the in-house researchers.</p>
<p>7. One way to retain the input of senior international researchers, while pursuing the <i>Afghanisation</i> of the organization, may be to develop stronger, more strategic and long-term partnerships with selected international research institutions. AREU should not adopt an "open door policy" to such collaboration but should demonstrate a stronger commitment to selective international partnerships.</p>	<p>AREU has developed a number of long-term international partnerships (examples include ODI and IDS).</p>
<p>8. Develop strategic partnerships with key stakeholders such as Afghan academia, other think tanks and civil society. After careful analysis, define strengthened partnership with the media as well.</p>	<p>Some partnerships developed (for examples, MOUs with certain Afghan universities) but to be reinforced further through practical cooperation</p>
<p>9. Work to diversify the funding base of the organization to reduce risk and</p>	<p>Limited progresses on this</p>

2013 Evaluation recommendation to AREU	Level of progress
improve the sustainability of the organization.	

5.3.3 Staffing

Goal 7 was “Strengthen the human resource capacity and representation of AREU staff”. The reduction in funding during the period has been mirrored in a reduction in AREU’s staff, from 46 in 2019 to 37 in 2021, with roughly even cuts being made across the main staff groups (academic, administrative, and support). Most of the downsizing happened however in the previous period, with particular difficult times in 2016, and the organization had twice as many staff five years ago. The narrative reports detail one by one the evolution of the staff, including who have not been replaced, mostly because of funding issues.³⁷

As in previous periods, AREU has drawn from a mix of core research staff and consultants (international researchers hired on a project basis) and the number of international researchers has reduced during the period (from 14 in 2019 to seven in 2020).³⁸ AREU informed the evaluation team that international researchers have often worked with AREU over an extended period of time on the basis of long-standing research projects and some are also the result of partnerships. Where AREU has had opportunity for drawing from Afghan capacities, it has done so. The Constitutional Review Partnership, for instance, was 100% Afghan staffed.

Where AREU itself initiates research, it issues open Calls for Proposals. These specify the thematic areas of interest (corresponding to AREU research priorities), provide an indicative format, and note that applications from Afghan researchers would be particularly welcome, as well as from international experts.³⁹ Proposals are assessed against a series of assessment criteria by a proposal board comprising four members of the EMT, followed by the AREU senior advisor and the AREU Director.

People consulted by the team had mixed views about the continued use of international consultants. In general, it was recognized that AREU benefits from the international reputation and skills that they can bring (thus providing quality and capacity development advantages). Some, however, pointed out that the use of international consultants as lead authors (coupled with the use of English as the main language and sources of funding) contributes to perceptions that AREU is “donor driven” and “well resourced” and to a degree of envy amongst Afghan peers. We find that this judgement is unjustified in view of the steps that AREU has taken to increase the Afghan leadership and authorship across the organization. But it points perhaps to the need to go further in communicating that AREU is an Afghan organization and remains based

³⁷ Based on the progress reports, five people were hired in 2019, and four resigned. In 2020, five people left and three were hired.

³⁸ There used to be around 22 international staff five years ago when the organization counted between 70 and 80 staff.

³⁹ Limited solicitation of proposals for policy research. AREU. 9 February 2022.

in Afghanistan. And visible signs of this could be an even stronger authorship role by Afghan researchers, including from the diaspora.

5.3.4 Reporting

AREU provides reports on quarterly basis to the Board, an annual report to Sida and periodic reports to the donors. Progress against the objectives in the Strategic Plan is reported on a quarterly basis. The reports include updates on each support grant project, updates on operations (security, procurement, communications, and human resources), financial updates, and reporting against goals and outcomes. As already noted, the latter are in fact outputs (not outcomes). The evaluation team finds that this reporting provides an adequate overview of AREU activity but the absence of any reflection about the organization's contribution to actual outcomes and impact is a shortcoming and should be addressed. This reporting does not include either general analysis of strategic orientations and themes, or potential strategic options for the evolution of the organization. We note that achieving this will require that the current logical framework is further developed along the lines discussed above.

Reports on the organization results also take place on a quarterly basis. Additionally, reporting contributes to structuring management actions, including weekly staff report to ensure that all staff activities are tracked through monthly staff reports.

5.3.5 Funding arrangements and cost effectiveness

Goal 6 was “Develop strategy for ensuring organizational sustainability”, which covered financial aspects as well as risk and security management. We find that AREU has had mixed results in terms of this goal.

AREU operates a mixed funding mechanism that draws from multi-year core and project funds. Sida is the only core funder, and counting for between a third and half of the resources of the organization, in addition to specific addition projects. The project funds are largely derived from AREU's engagement with international research counterparts (e.g. IDS, ODI, RUSI), UN partners (e.g. UN Women, WFP), global research funds (e.g. The Global Challenges Research Fund – GCRF), donor agencies (e.g. EU), and other sources.

Project grants are often the result of a tendering process. In 2019, for example, AREU submitted 18 proposals, of which 8 were accepted (44 percent), in 2020, out of 20 proposals, 8 were successful and in 2021, 12 proposals were submitted.⁴⁰ This appears a relatively good success rate, although unsuccessful bids obviously incur wasted transaction costs and potential challenges in the pre-identification of the project. The project funding varies between 11,000 and 110,000 USD, but is mostly between 30 and 40,000 USD in 2020, and with limited success for securing large multi-year projects.

⁴⁰ AREU did succeed in securing a five-year project with NUSIP and a five-year FCDO project in partnership with TLO. A four-year EU project took place between 2016 and 2020.

The total income received by AREU has decreased over the past three years (USD 1.88 million in 2019 to USD 0.98 million in 2021), which can be attributed to a decrease in project grants. Sida's core grant contribution over the three years has been USD 1.7 million, of which 44% has been used for research or direct costs related to research and 56% on non-research costs. The annual amount has remained more or less constant (and was USD 0.57 million in 2021) and has therefore increased in importance for AREU as other sources have decreased (see Table 6 below).⁴¹ We note that there were funding challenges in the last 5 months of 2021 when no funding could be raised.

With regard to cost-effectiveness, we have considered AREU's research outputs in relation to the organization's overall budget, which provides the means to produce the outputs. Based on those overall figures, the average cost for a research paper (not counting the different translations and formats), is then around 100,000 - 130,000 USD, based upon the 10 research publications in 2019 and 13 in 2020.

Table 6: AREU Incomes sources (USD)

	2019	2020	2021
Sida	595,517	532,471	573,103
Others, including:	1,277,752	1,077,075	407,898
- EU NRM	886,017	617,726	
- GCRF SOAS	137,816	200,828	164,140
- GDPP (FPOS)	50,000	99,990	99,990
- EID (FMIC)		75,646	
- Assessment of livelihoods (SCI)	26,957		
- NUPI EUNPACK		36,389	
- IDS COVID Collective			71,838

Source: AREU Audit reports 2020, 2021

With regard to Sida's choice of funding mechanism, core support offers advantages to AREU at a time when funding has generally shrunk. It provides AREU with the flexibility to follow its own priorities. It also means that the core funding has sometimes functioned as a "gap filler" allowing AREU to maintain its research themes where other sources of funding have not been available. AREU has also been able to finance one research project a year based using Sida's funding, although the actual costs of this are relatively limited compared to the size of the funding. In this sense, it has enabled AREU to avoid an excessive dependence upon project grants reflecting donor interests and the risk of cutting research themes where such funding is not available.

In terms of expenditure, we note that human resources represent the main share of AREU's costs, of which consultants and subcontractors amount to a relatively modest

⁴¹ Analysis derived from AREU financial reporting and annual audits

12% in 2021 and 14.5% in 2019.⁴² The bulk of AREU costs are therefore represented by salaries of AREU core staff and senior management.

⁴² Q4 Report, Expense versus projection

Table 7 : Consultants and salaries costs (USD)

	2019	2020	2021
Consultants & sub-contractors	137,549	127,298	89,798
Salaries	946,945	932,388	750,971

Source: AREU Audit Reports 2020 & 2021

AREU's financial processes were strengthened after 2018 with a change of software and the development of different policies as mentioned above (anti-bribery, reserve fund, procurement policies). Interviewees mentioned that internal security control increased over the suppliers as well as the efficiency in AREU operations. The number of cash transactions also decreased and happen now only in exceptional cases. This has also strengthened transparency. The annual tax return is obtained more and more rapidly, from 45 days in 2018 to 7 days in 2021. Bank Charges also decreased.

5.3.6 Organizational processes and governance

Goal 5 is “Ensure quality internal management and administration processes within AREU” and our interviews and the documentation show that this mostly focused on M&E, internal communication and dissemination and compliance of administration processes / timeliness of the outputs. The evaluation team finds the management arrangements and organization of AREU to be adequate for an institution of AREU's size and our interviews with AREU staff and Board members indicate that its works effectively, despite the Director's current location outside of Afghanistan.

The Board of Directors is composed of representatives from donors, inter-governmental organizations, civil society and independent experts. The updated list of February 2022 shows that four Board members are international figures and three are Afghan (including the chairperson). Our interviews with AREU management and with selected Board members indicate that there remains considerable value in maintaining a mixed Board of Afghan and international members. The Board members have been selected with considerable skill and include people with long-term experience and understanding of Afghanistan, which makes them a valuable sounding board for AREU management. We find it important that this value is maintained in any new composition, which could perhaps increase the representation of the Afghan members. The Board's terms of reference were drafted in September 2017, focusing on the role in strategic advice, peer review, and oversight of the organizational processes, which appear adequate for its role.

One area where AREU has not made progress during the period concerns the establishment of a Research Advisory Board (RAB), which was one of the expected “outcomes” under Goal 8 “Strengthen the quality of research and dissemination of findings”. The RAB is mentioned as a priority in the 2019-2021 Strategic Plan. In the absence of any terms of reference (yet), the evaluation team suggest its primary purpose could be to provide professional advice to AREU to influence the quality of research

products, the choice of concepts, research priorities, and considerations relating to the inclusion of national and international experts and possible opportunities emerging for research funding, as well as support to a more strategic monitoring of the achievements in the different research themes. It could be made up of leading research experts (perhaps 5 members, with an Afghan chairperson) nationally and internationally who are prominent academics, members of think tanks, and independent professionals with a research background. It could also play a role in expanding AREU's role worldwide and would bolster AREU's credibility as an independent research institution.

The evaluation team finds that the absence of the Research Advisory Board has not adversely affected AREU's performance, but it would nonetheless be a useful addition to further demonstrate the organization's ability to undertake research of an international standard that meets Afghanistan's needs. It will be important that the majority of the Board members are Afghan with solid research experience in order to cement AREU's Afghan credentials. An alternative option that could be considered would be to combine the Board of Directors and RAB roles, although this would require that sufficient academics (Afghan and international) are added. On balance, the evaluation team considers that the two roles should be kept separate in order to help protect the latter's scientific integrity.

Day to day internal management and coordination is provided by an Executive Management Team comprising senior management. The terms of reference for the EMT note that its members play an advisory role, and it is the Director or, in his/her absence, the Chairman of the Board that takes decisions. The EMT meets on a bi-weekly basis.⁴³ Our interviews with AREU staff and Board members indicated that the EMT is an effective body and does not require change.

A key management role is taken by AREU's Director, who is currently located in London. Our interviews conformed that the Director is a well-respected Afghan figure who has successfully steered AREU away from potential threats, including funding difficulties, security, and operational challenges, and (previous) complaints about politicization. It is obviously not ideal that she is currently located outside of Afghanistan, although in the current situation, this is probably the most realistic option. She is supported by an Acting Director, who is based in Kabul.

Following the 2013 evaluation, AREU has strengthened its procedures and guidelines and as mentioned, these now cover key areas such as finance, procurement, anti-corruption, anti-bribery, whistleblowing, proposal solicitation. A preliminary review of these documents by the evaluation team assesses them to be in line with good practice. They have not all been approved yet.

⁴³ AREU EMT, Terms of Reference

5.3.7 Partnerships

As already noted, AREU has a range of partners at local, national and international level and has to adjust to the specific dynamics and interests of those different categories of stakeholders. Specific goals in the Strategic Plan include to “Develop outreach and education strategies for Afghan university engagement with the intention of training students, building domestic research capacity, providing learning products, disseminating research findings, and augmenting faculty curriculum (Goal 4, Objective 1) and Strengthen and expand partnerships with relevant research organizations both international and domestic in order to expand research areas, improve dissemination, and diversify funding mechanisms, and build domestic research capacity. (Goal 4, Objective 2).”

The evaluation team finds that AREU has sought to connect with the Afghan research community during the period. The reporting describes some involvement with national NGOs and CSO networks for dissemination exchanges but less for joint research projects. There are also linkages with a few universities (e.g. Kabul University, Balkh University, Kateb University), including for the dissemination of research findings. Some of these have been formalized through memoranda (MoU). Our interviews with Afghan academics indicated that AREU’s research products are used in teaching and by Afghan students (examples mentioned include research on constitutional issues, gender, water and natural resources). Some of the research content has been included in the curriculum of universities, such as the American University. Our interviews noted that AREU’s library and resource center is beneficial for young researchers and students. In the light of the recent changes, there would be merit in AREU cementing and developing further its interactions with Afghan universities and other think tanks (such as the Afghan Analysts Network – AAN) in order to a) promote further the development and use of evidence-based research, b) strengthen research capacities and methodologies, and c) ensure that an Afghan research capacity is maintained.

AREU has enjoyed considerable success in establishing and maintaining its international partnerships during the evaluation period. These links are reported in detail in the annual reports, and include summaries of cooperation with actors such as SOAS, RUSI, the Global Drug Policy Observatory (GDPO), the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), amongst others. AREU has also been able to successfully locate parts of its research portfolio within wider global research packages and funds (such as the Global Challenges Research Fund, GCRF). An example of this is the collaboration with ODI as part of the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN) to which AREU contributed research on the impact of COVID-19 on poverty in Afghanistan drawing from field level data collection.⁴⁴ Our interviews with international research institutes, such as ODI and IDS, highlighted the value that AREU offers, including researchers with nuanced contextual understanding enabling them to navigate gatekeepers and contextual complexities. Especially in the current context, the

⁴⁴ Afghanistan COVID-19 Poverty Monitor, March 2022, AREU/CPAN

value added is that AREU has access and can continue to operate inside Afghanistan. This places AREU in a potentially very favorable position as a partner.

AREU is also involved in coordination networks in the country, such as INSO and ACBAR, which involves over a hundred international and national NGOs to discuss security and authorities' relations.

5.3.8 Communications and research dissemination

Communication is a key component of the strategic framework, with objectives relating to dissemination and access to research findings (Goal 3, Objective 1), stimulating public discussion (Goal 3 objective 2), amongst others. A number of indicators refer to the outreach and dissemination of the publications as highlighted above (see Effectiveness section).

Reports and other information are easily accessible via the AREU website (www.AREU.org). Following its relaunch in mid-2019, AREU's data shows that there were 220,725 visits in 2020 and 242,926 visits in 2021. This increase is mirrored by a significant improvement in access to AREU's most popular research reports – from 565 unique downloads in 2019 for the report “The Helmand Food Zone: The Illusion of Success”, to 6,682 downloads of “From A to Z: Handbook to Help Afghanistan” in 2020, and to 20,191 downloads of the report “Understanding Control and Influence: What Opium Poppy and Tax Reveal about the Writ of the Afghan State” in 2021.⁴⁵

We note that the Afghan community is a diverse stakeholder group and that it will be important that AREU maintains its quality controls while also checking in with its local (and international) audience so that its research continues to be useful and accessible. In this regard, we find the variety of research publications and modalities useful as they permit the research to be accessed in a range of different ways, from short policy notes to longer issues papers and reports, as well as via blogs, podcasts and other social media. Different formats will be suitable for different stakeholder groups, and we note that AREU has gone to some lengths already to accommodate this. With the August 2021 changes, however, there may be reason to consider whether the current range of communications mechanisms are fully fit for purpose. Some stakeholders may find that even shorter (perhaps two-page) “briefing notes” with key messages in all three languages may be more accessible than longer publications using technical language.

AREU has had a proactive approach to ensuring that research findings are disseminated to the right audience by organizing events and inviting key stakeholders, including policy makers, international community, donors, CSOs and media. Several Afghan CSOs that we consulted mentioned nonetheless that the outreach and publications of the research remains quite limited and should be expanded further beyond donors and the international community. Again, we do not consider this criticism to be fully justified, although the fact that it was voiced indicates a need to improve communications to local stakeholders.

⁴⁵ Data provided by AREU reports from Google Analytics.

Until August 2021, AREU also engaged in direct policy dialogue with the former Afghan Government to promote uptake of its research findings by government departments. Examples mentioned by AREU, and former government officials include AREU's work on livelihoods, water and irrigation, women's rights, and women's empowerment.

The annual reports also indicate that between 60-80 invitations were received annually for AREU staff (often the Director) to participate in international as well as Afghanistan located events organized by other actors, of which around a third are accepted.⁴⁶ This has included high level UN and international events relating to Afghanistan providing an important opportunity for evidence-based advocacy. Such exposure is regularly included in AREU reporting. AREU publications are also promoted through its networking. For example, AREU joined Columbia International Affairs Online at Columbia University Press after the signing of a partnership agreement under which AREU publications are displayed on the CIAO platform.⁴⁷

AREU has also used a variety of social media tools to disseminate information (including blogs, podcasts, and internet-based videos). AREU informed the evaluation team that access and interest in AREU increased following an enhancement of these tools in 2020. For example, social media messaging is used to accompany research publications and research events. A blog was launched along with the new website, but nothing has been published since end 2020 and it does not allow for readers to post messages and facilitate interactions. The team observes that it will be time-consuming to create content on an ongoing basis and external messages could lead to unproductive conflict if not moderated carefully. Data on donors and partnerships does not appear anymore given the uncertainty of the context.

Finally, it should be noted that AREU's library has also contributed to disseminating research within Afghanistan. The library now has a collection of over 20,000 books and periodicals, including Afghan government publications, publications about Afghanistan produced by NGOs and from UN and donor agencies, as well as certain historical documents. During the evaluation period, the library has loaned books to other libraries around the country. Physical visits numbered 158 (2019), 225 (2020) and 84 (2021).⁴⁸

The COVID-19 led to increased number of virtual events, which also contributed to increase the audience and dissemination with participants from all over the world, while personal contacts remain important to promote the publications according to the interviewees. The approach to promote the research was to select 3 to 4 strategic messages and use them in social media, which resulted in more interest, from students notably. Following the Taliban take-over, AREU cut its social media activities.

⁴⁶ Calculation based upon reported events attended in 2nd Quarterly report, April-June 2021.

⁴⁷ CIAO works with over 250 institutions, garners over 6,000 views per week, and provides content to hundreds of researchers each month.

⁴⁸ Data provided by AREU

To sustain the outreach while the staff could not travel in country, we were informed that contract was made with PenPath volunteers who distributed AREU publications in provinces, which appears as a very interesting practice to sustain stakeholder engagement and outreach at the local level. In a context of high illiteracy and with only 13% of the Afghan population connected to the internet, such practices are essential to embed AREU into local population including at the provincial level.

Sida's visibility remains quite limited in the publications, and the logo is not displayed on the different research documents, since they are funded by projects, but indirectly Sida covers some of their costs since the funding by project would not be sufficient to ensure the functioning of the organization. It does not appear either on the newsletter and communication material.

5.3.9 Risk management

AREU operates a regularly updated risk assessment and mitigation mechanism with the input of senior management. Although not particularly detailed, we find that this demonstrates awareness of key risks (such as physical and cybersecurity, health, financial, advocacy) and provides opportunities for the EMT to intervene and adjust operations where necessary. Security risks appear well-managed, and no incidents were mentioned during interviews. AREU's ability to gain work authorization relatively rapidly from the de facto authorities is also a positive indicator in this regard. The authorization to operate was indeed received relatively rapidly in early 2022.

5.4 IMPACT

The evaluation team has attempted to assess the higher-level effects of AREU's work, including on policies and practices in Afghanistan, as well as wider effects internationally. We note that it is very difficult to attribute impact to single interventions and there is insufficient data available to do so in this case. It is, however, possible to identify likely outcomes (these being the uptake or use of AREU's work by stakeholders) based upon triangulation of inputs from interviewees and the available documentation from AREU. In the following, we link our key findings to AREU's overall vision statement and to the more outward-focused of its strategic goals as well as AREU's theory of change.⁴⁹

Our interviews and the documentation point to a variety of contributions during the period examined, including towards:

- a. More evidence-based government policies. This is the expected outcome of Goal 1, Objective 1 (Inform Afghan government policy). Our interviews with AREU and former Afghan government officials showed that relevant departments from the former government attended AREU presentations and that AREU staff held direct dialogue with key officials. AREU informed the team that there were indications

⁴⁹ As noted earlier, the majority of AREU's strategic goals and objectives are in fact inward looking and concern AREU's organization and capacity and, as such, are only indirectly relevant from an impact perspective. In the section here we have deliberately focused on the outward looking goals.

of uptake in the former government's policies, although sources (i.e. AREU reports) were not actually referenced. Significant contributions relate notably to gender issues and water management.⁵⁰ Our interviews with former senior officials indicate that AREU expertise was highly regarded in the former Ministry of Women's Affairs, where AREU provided supported to the development of policy and the establishment of a research department. AREU's comparative strengths were reportedly its ability to provide informal evidence-based and tailored inputs based combined with the strong reputation of its director. Similarly, in relation to the environment, AREU has had a major research focus on irrigation and ground water issues. Inter alia, the evaluation team was informed that Kabul municipality had drawn from AREU's research for its work plans and engineering department, as well as in training. The former Ministry of Urban Development had used AREU's work samples for its own research. AREU analytical papers were also used by Kabul Polytechnic and reported in the media. Other examples demonstrate, however, that this positive and constructive interaction and uptake of research should not be taken for granted. In the area of migration, the evaluation team learnt that AREU's 2019 research findings were not accepted and could not be used by the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation and the organization's relationship with the Ministry suffered as a result (which does not, of course, mean that the findings were not well constructed and accurate). This, however, appears to be an exception. The evaluation team finds therefore that AREU has contributed to improving the quality of government policy through its reports, events, and dialogue activities.

- b. Strengthened Afghan capacities for research. This is relevant to Goal 4, Objective 2 (strengthen and expand partnerships with relevant international and domestic research organizations) as well as Goal 7, Objective 2 (enhanced research management, analysis and writing skills). Our interviews with AREU researchers show that, over the years, AREU has moved from using Afghan enumerators in data collection to developing the capacities of young researchers so that they are able to contribute to analysis and report writing. This is a consequence of AREU's focus on developing its research staff during the period and, importantly, the practice of using mixed research teams that combine national and international researchers where the national team members are not simply enumerators but have roles in analysis and drafting. There has thus been a corresponding increase in the number of AREU reports authored by Afghan researchers (although some of these are amongst the diaspora). In relation to the wider domestic research capacity, several of our interviews with Afghan stakeholders referred to the usefulness of AREU research for students at Afghan universities. NGOs and CSOs also reported that they draw from AREU's research as a source of credible evidence. The evaluation team finds therefore that AREU serves an important function in strengthening (and in the current situation, maintaining) an Afghan research capacity and that without these efforts the research base in Afghanistan would be considerably weaker.

⁵⁰ Interviews with former Afghan Government officials

- c. Increased international learning and knowledge on specific sectors in Afghanistan. This is mainly relevant to Goal 1, Objective 2 (inform national and international program design and implementation actors, civil society and academic community through AREU's evidence-based research). Our interviews with international partners and experts show that AREU's reputation and the accessibility of its reports means that its research is able to contribute to international knowledge on the sectors where AREU works. Our interviews indicate that AREU is a credible and trusted source. This is attributed to AREU's ability to use English as its primary research and publication language, the quality of its research methodologies (particularly its use of primary data from interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys), its high degree of access to stakeholders (also outside of Kabul), its ability to recruit internationally respected researchers, and its global reputation. AREU's relative importance is enhanced due to the lack of alternatives on the ground in Afghanistan and the weak capacity for high level research amongst Afghan academic institutions. Interviewees from international advocacy organizations noted that they regularly drew from AREU's research in their own advocacy campaigns, which the evaluation team considers a form of uptake. Case studies drawing from primary data collection in the provinces was mentioned as being particularly valuable. Examples mentioned also include research on provincial budgeting, taxation, constitutional issues, mining, transitional justice, reconciliation and reintegration, land disputes.

In relation to Goal 1, Objective 3 (Influence stakeholders' research and funding priorities through AREU's evidence-based research), a further factor enabling AREU's international contribution is the location of much of its research within wider global research packages and funds (such as the Global Challenges Research Fund, GCRF) and its research partnerships with leading global research institutes. An example of this is the collaboration with ODI as part of the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network (CPAN) to which AREU contributed research on the impact of COVID-19 on poverty in Afghanistan drawing from field level data collection.⁵¹ Our interviews with international research institutes, such as ODI and IDS, highlighted that AREU makes a valued contribution to joint work partly because AREU can function as a reliable national partner with experienced qualitative researchers that have a nuanced contextual understanding enabling them to navigate gatekeepers and contextual complexities. This was seen as critical as, without it, the research would have been at too high a level. Over time, a personal familiarity grows that strengthens and sustains the research relationship. According to our international researcher interviewees, this was very valuable.

The evaluation team finds that AREU's contribution to spreading knowledge about Afghanistan beyond its borders has been significant. Our interviews suggest that international research institutes have benefitted considerably from AREU as an active and reliable partner and that, without this, international policies and contributions to Afghanistan would have been less evidence based. We are not able

⁵¹ Afghanistan COVID-19 Poverty Monitor, March 2022, AREU/CPAN

to present any firm findings relating to AREU's (and its collaborating partners') influence on donor policies and practice due to our limited consultation within the donor community. However, our interview with a former member of the Swedish Embassy indicates that AREU research was read and found useful.

The above findings show that AREU has had impacts in accordance with its theory of change and expected results at an intervention level. Inter alia, the theory of change states that "solid, evidence-based research conducted using the highest ethical and quality-control standards can directly stimulate public discourse and policy decisions that are rooted in the lived reality and experiences of Afghan men and women." There is evidence that this has taken place in relation to the former government's policy in certain areas, particularly gender and water. There is also evidence that AREU has contributed to public discourse on its research topics, although this appears to mainly concern stakeholders (civil society, students, academics) already active within the fields discussed. We find it plausible that AREU has thereby contributed to Afghanistan's development in these areas because of the influence of this research, although the sustainability of this development has now been placed in question by the Taliban takeover.

6 Observations relating to the short-to medium term

The evaluation team has explored various issues surrounding AREU's short-and medium-term future in Afghanistan following the Taliban take-over. We note that AREU has developed an interim strategy as an initial response, and we have assessed the relevance of this against the views of the stakeholders consulted.

The evaluation team find that there are prospects for AREU's continued work in Afghanistan, although the precise organization and focus of that work is not entirely clear. It is encouraging that initial contacts with the new authorities have been constructive (and that AREU has been able to register with the Ministry of Economy). However, there remain a large number of uncertainties and risks. It will be important that AREU maps and monitors these and prepares contingency plans as already started.

AREU's interim strategy developed following the Taliban takeover represents a pragmatic and realistic step, noting that a) there will remain a need for independent and credible research, b) demand will primarily come from the international community but that opportunities may arise within Afghanistan, and c) that AREU can contribute to maintaining an Afghan research capacity and practice. All our interviewees stressed that AREU will, however, need to be seen to be impartial and non-threatening to Islamic values. This will most likely mean that certain themes (e.g. gender) cannot be treated as directly as before and that a clear Afghan identity will be important. Our interviews confirmed thematic areas that could be pursued may include the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance, natural resource management, economic issues, and social protection and livelihoods. Those themes were in the interim strategic plan.

The limited access of international organizations implies an increased role and potential opportunities for Afghan based organizations to fulfil the role previously played by international organizations. This means additional funding opportunities notably to provide updated, consistent and frequent data and analyses on the situation, needs and dynamics in key sectors. These also implies some risks that should be analyzed further.

In addition, according to our interviews, interventions on sectors such as governance, conflict and peace related work are likely to be less in demand or more difficult to analyze. The de facto authorities have limited skills and experience in managing institutions and reinstating public services which collapsed following the take-over, while the security dynamics still threaten parts of the country. Keeping as a reference the interests of the populations and mitigating the risks for the Afghan communities, research and analysis to highlight priorities and keep track of trends are likely to remain important and AREU is very well placed to contribute to this provided it avoids sensitive topics and is aligned with Islamic law.

7 Conclusions

Sida has played a key role through its core funding to AREU in ensuring the continuity of the organization and in maintaining / building research skills in Afghanistan. During the evaluation period, AREU has shed light on relevant topics in the Afghan context for the Afghan population, the former government, and the international community. This was also coherent with Sida strategies. Moreover, AREU showed strong capacities to adapt to the changing environment, including after the change of regime in August 2021, and to maintain operational skills and neutrality.

AREU appears to have navigated well the complex context and the specific challenges of the country, with a good balance on the sensitivity and usefulness of the research topics. Some research topics remain quite essential given the dire needs of the Afghan population, including to contribute to advocacy in ensuring the provision of basic livelihoods, articulating short term emergency support with longer term dynamics. Natural resource management and poppy cultivation are themes where interests of the different categories of stakeholders converge.

The strategic framework provided by the 2019-2021 Strategic Plan had a focus on the organizational dimension of the work. AREU has improved its processes and is able to capitalize on its long-term expertise on key topics. This has contributed to strengthening the organization and key dimensions of its work processes, notably outreach, communication, and stakeholder's engagement. Most of the objectives defined in the strategic plan have been reached, although we find that the targets were relatively modest. Challenges remain in the identification of the results chain in the research sectors and actual impact on the ground and a stronger use of theory of change and further consolidation of the monitoring process in that respect would be useful. This should involve exposing assumptions and pre-conditions for change and monitoring of them.

Looking forward, while some research areas may not be as relevant as in the past, ensuring a cross-cutting integration of differentiated analyses between social groups throughout the research, including gender specificities, will still need to be ensured.

The reliance on Sida funding constitutes a risk for the sustainability of the organization, on which progress must be made. At another level, the transfer of skills between international researchers and Afghan researchers has started but there remains overreliance on a few external staff and the extensive "brain drain" from Afghanistan of qualified researchers will probably make it even more difficult. This should be pursued further. Likewise, the evaluation points to the relevance of strengthening the AREU's Afghan "fingerprint", including through the composition of the Board, the composition and presentation of research teams, and relations with Afghan partners.

This needs to be achieved while maintaining the quality and relevance of AREU's overall approach and its research. The latter suggests a continuing need for active engagement with international partners, research and donors. The development of new types of new skills related to the assessment of socio-economic dynamics in the country and periodic publications, that could result in a flagship product, could support this. A continued focus on high quality research appears essential to secure AREU's access to funds and partnerships.

AREU has positioned itself and has engaged with diverse categories of stakeholders from international to local level, between government, civil society, and communities during the evaluation period. While the international support was key in supporting the organization, the increased role of Afghan nationals is promising and offers room for further development. Work at the local level beyond the capital is also a good opportunity to strengthen the integration in local networks.

Our overall conclusion is that AREU has played a positive and active role in influencing policy making in Afghanistan during the evaluation period. It has contributed to evidence-based policies and strategies from the former government, in addition to increasing the knowledge and skills of the key stakeholders in the country and abroad. The current context implies a rethink of the positioning of the organization given the limited potential for support to Taliban-led policies, while research is still required for informed decision-making by all stakeholders, including the international community, and this presents important opportunities for AREU.

8 Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the evaluation team has the following recommendations.

To Sida:

1. **Continue to provide core funding to AREU**, considering its professionalism and ability to work in the evolving Afghan context, its role in supporting research in Afghanistan, and provision of research on essential topics for both Afghan stakeholders and the international community.
2. **Provide technical support** to assist AREU in the design of the strategic framework and objectives.
3. Sida should support the use of AREU research to inform other interventions and synergies between its various projects.

To AREU:

4. **Increase the involvement of Afghan stakeholders in the Board and the establishment and implementation of the Research Advisory Board.**
 - a. The involvement of Afghan stakeholders should be strengthened in the Board of Directors. Those stakeholders could be academic, media, independent researchers, or other prominent figures, preferably based in Afghanistan. Avoiding the involvement of politicians is still key to maintain the independence and neutrality of the organization. Continue to prioritize an international presence in the Board using respected and experienced international figures.
 - b. The Research Advisory Board should be established. This would mean involving four or five Afghan – including Afghan based - and international researchers or academics with a specific role to provide advice, guidance, on the definition of the research themes, quality of the research and typology of the publications.
5. **Consider developing new services, including a flagship product, and new skills of interest to both Afghan and international stakeholders.**
 - c. AREU should consider developing an annual or periodic analytical publication specific to the organization. This should provide comparable and consistent data to assess evolution of key trends and priorities in the Afghan context. This could also contribute to increase the strategic positioning of the organization in the country and such a **flagship product** could help secure longer-term support from donors.

- d. In relation to this, basic skills on **quantitative analysis and impact assessment** could be developed. This would help strengthen AREU's research capacity and partnership options and diversify the types of funding sources available.
- 6. **Strengthen further the capacity building of Afghan researchers**, in terms of transfers of skills between international researchers and Afghan researchers, and the development of new skills for which AREU is well positioned given the evolution of the context.
 - e. The **hand-over and increased involvement of the Afghan researchers** in the various themes **should be formalized as part of the objectives, and a process for mentoring should be structured with partnerships** with international researchers, including those already actively involved with the organization. Partnerships with universities or associations could be further developed in that respect for broader internship protocols, and on the other hand opportunities of ad hoc teaching role for the researchers.
 - f. The **involvement of Afghan researchers should be systematic, and they should be credited in the different publications** to gain credibility and legitimacy – within the limit of the security and sensitivity of the context -, to avoid the overreliance on a few international researchers and to ensure transfer of skills on the long term. **Female researchers** should also be involved more systematically and beyond gender specific themes of research.
 - g. Consider revising the budgeting with other projects to ensure that they cover all research costs and use Sida funding to strengthen the engagement with Afghan researchers; for example, through using it to fund Afghan-led research projects.
- 7. **Strengthen further the consistency of the strategic framework and definition of the objectives in the different themes, and related monitoring and evaluation system, while keeping it easy to use and adaptable in view of the current context.**
 - h. The assumptions underlying the Theory of Change should be clearly detailed in order to enable it to function as a management tool.
 - i. The results chain and expected objectives in the different thematic areas should be better defined by unpacking the different steps and levels of results leading to the expected objectives and impact. There is a need to align the results framework with international standards for results-based management.
 - j. As part of the development of the research agenda (and with guidance from the Research Advisory Board) strengthen the rationale and focus of the research themes while ensuring that they remain flexible enough to respond to relevant opportunities arising (given that this is likely to remain AREU's main source of funding).
 - k. In relation to the above, the M&E system should better focus on the monitoring of higher-level results.

8. **Ensure the mainstreaming of the cross-cutting issues throughout the research, beyond specific targeted analyses.** This is particularly relevant to gender, equity and conflict.
9. **Continue to engage pro-actively with donors, international partners, and other sources of funds to strengthen the medium-term funding base, including scope for core funding in addition to Sida.** Maintaining high quality research capability and mixed Afghan/international research teams will be a key to this. Having periodic publications (such as a flagship publication) could provide rationales to justify this core funding.
10. **Strengthen further the activities and partnership at the local level,** in the different regions of Afghanistan to increase the coverage of the most remote and isolated areas, and involvement of stakeholders in the regions, provinces, including universities and civil society, and at local level.
11. **Continue a flexible, neutral and low-profile approach in the new context.** Risks have been well managed to date, and the context remains highly uncertain. Ensuring that AREU is closely entrenched into the local tissue of society (also outside of Kabul) while keeping a research approach useful to a broad range of stakeholders, remains key.

Annex 1 – Terms of Reference



Terms of Reference for the Evaluation of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, strategy period 2019-2021

Date: October 2021

1. General information

1.1 Introduction

Sida has provided support to the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, AREU, for almost 20 years. The current core support agreement was signed in 2018 and the activity period ends in December 2021. The agreement with AREU was signed during Sida's previous strategy. In May this year the Swedish Government decided on a new strategy for Sweden's development cooperation with Afghanistan for 2021-2024.

AREU's strategic plan 2019-2021 with the title: "Moving Forward in a challenging environment" is coming to an end and AREU is in a phase of developing a new strategic plan for the coming years (2022-2024).

It means that both Sida and AREU are in phases of planning its work in Afghanistan in the years to come. This evaluation will focus on results achieved and challenges faced by AREU during the period 2019-2021 to provide recommendations for the future in general and for its new strategic plans more specifically.

Afghanistan has until August 15th when Taliban troops entered Kabul been in a complex volatile situation. After the overtake of power by the Taliban de facto authority the security situation has improved, however the country is close to a collapse of its banking system and social service delivery systems. Food insecurity is increasing with a dramatic speed. The country's civilian life and human rights is strongly affected by the de facto regime's rule and many of the positive developments and achievement in education and health services as well as improvements in economic growth, community development, women's rights, constitutional integrity and investments in infrastructure are at stake. Patriarchal structures and negative gender norms are still persistent in informal structures and communities affecting girls and women's human rights severely. Afghanistan counts as one of the countries in the world that already are, and in the future even more so will be, severely hit by effects due to climate and environmental changes such as floods, soil degradation and

droughts. Despite all the ongoing and emerging challenges, Afghanistan is a country with estimated 30 million population and majority of the people do support the positive gains of the last two decades in areas of democratisation, women's advancement and many aspects of progress in infrastructure development.

AREU's research agenda was developed to relate to and contribute to Afghanistan's social, economic and political development by evaluating and monitoring the dynamic shifts in social, economic and political systems of Afghanistan. AREU's aim has been to be relevant to internal and external actors, as well as the Afghan Government.⁵² As an organisation with over 20 years of operating under a challenging environment in Afghanistan, with highly achieved global integrity and credit for its work⁵³, AREU is finding the best ways and strategies to cope with existing challenges and continue its operations under different possible scenarios moving ahead.

However, one of AREU's challenges over the years has been limited funding of its research agenda.

External and national funding to research in Afghanistan is limited. Research at Universities and Higher Education Institutions is practically non-existent at the country level. Few professors may conduct research but there are very few Masters and PhD-programs. A proper Higher Education and Research Policy is lacking, the number and quality of PhD programs are limited and training in writing scientific papers at Master level is inadequate.⁵⁴

Except from AREU's research and evaluations publications, some research are also produced by other Think Tanks, such as Afghan Analysts Network (AAN) and the National Center for Policy Research (NCPR).

1.2 Evaluation objective: Intervention to be evaluated

The intervention to be evaluated is AREU and its implementation of the Strategic plan 2019–2021. Aspects of the intervention to be evaluated are:

- The strategic plan 2019–2021: in particular the goals/objectives and theory of change, implementation arrangements and monitoring and follow-up.
- Target groups: researchers, consultants, research assistants and users of the research products such as internal and external stakeholders as well as the Afghan public.
- Funds budgeted and spent, core funds spent on activities, especially on high quality research.
- AREU's geographical coverage.
- Sida's/other donors' roles
- How AREU relates to other initiatives (donor or government funded)
- Specific issues/challenges that the evaluator should be aware of is that AREU has faced funding shortages and difficulties to plan due to a volatile context and the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Sida commissioned an evaluation of AREU in 2013. The conclusions and recommendations in that evaluation should be taken into account.

⁵² AREU Strategic plan 2019–2021.

⁵³ TTCSP Global Go To Think Tank Index Report names AREU as the Top Think Tank in Afghanistan and the third top in Central Asia while among globally known independent think tanks, AREU holds 26th position among 143 organizations. https://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks.

⁵⁴ Help Desk Study by Niras, Higher Education and Research in Afghanistan: an overview. 2018.

Evaluation of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU), December 2013,
Sida decentralised evaluation 2014:2:I.

For further information, the intervention proposal is attached as Annex D.

The intervention logic or theory of change of the intervention may be further elaborated by the evaluator in the inception report, if deemed necessary.

1.3 Evaluation rationale

The evaluation will be carried out at this point in time because AREU's strategic plan period (2019–2021) is coming to an end and the AREU team will be engaged in developing a new strategic plan. Sida's agreement with AREU is also coming to an end and Sida has recently received a new bilateral development strategy with Afghanistan. The conclusions and recommendations from the evaluation will be useful for both parties in strategic planning.

2. The assignment

2.1 Evaluation purpose: Intended use and intended users

The purpose or intended use of the evaluation is to provide Sida and AREU with an assessment of results and progress in the strategic plan period 2019–2021 to learn from what works well and less well. The evaluation will be used to inform decisions on how implementation may be adjusted and how to improve the use of Sida funding to successfully link it with other AREU projects to achieve the strategic plan's goals and objectives within the given time frame.

The primary intended users of the evaluation are Sida's unit for Afghanistan, the Swedish embassy, the AREU and its board members.

The evaluation is to be designed, conducted and reported to meet the needs of the intended users and tenderers shall elaborate in the tender how this will be ensured during the evaluation process. Other stakeholders that should be kept informed about the evaluation include AREU's Board of Directors (through AREU Director) and other committed partners and donors of AREU, and relevant government partner institutions with whom AREU has been working on project implementation.

During the inception phase, the evaluator and the users will agree on who will be responsible for keeping the various stakeholders informed about the evaluation.

2.2 Evaluation scope

The evaluation scope is limited to AREU as an organisation and its implementation of the strategic plan 2019-2021.

If needed, the scope of the evaluation may be further elaborated by the evaluator in the inception report.

2.3 Evaluation objective: Criteria and questions

The objectives of this evaluation are to:

- Evaluate the implementation of the strategic plan 2019-2021, specifically with regard to its vision, mission, overall objectives and theory of change. Formulate recommendations on how its management team can improve and adjust implementation.
- Evaluate AREU's organisation and implementation in a complex working environment and formulate recommendations as an input to upcoming discussions concerning the preparation of AREU's new three-years strategic plan.

The evaluation questions are:

Relevance: Is the intervention doing the right thing?

- To what extent has the intervention objectives and design responded to beneficiaries', global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies, and priorities, and have they continued to do so when circumstances have changed?
- To what extent have lessons learned from what works well and less well been used to improve and adjust intervention implementation?

Effectiveness: Is the intervention achieving its objectives?

- To what extent has the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives, and its results, including any differential results across groups?
- Have the M&E system delivered robust and useful information that could be used to assess progress towards outcomes and contribute to learning?

Efficiency: How well are resources being used?

- To what extent has the intervention delivered, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way?

Impact: What difference does the intervention make?

- To what extent has the project or programme generated, or is expected to generate, significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, high-level effects with special consideration to Sida's five perspectives?

Questions are expected to be developed in the tender by the tenderer and further refined during the inception phase of the evaluation.

2.4 Evaluation approach and methods

It is expected that the evaluator describes and justifies an appropriate evaluation approach/methodology and methods for data collection in the tender. The evaluation design, methodology and methods for data collection and analysis are expected to be fully developed and presented in the inception report. Given the situation with Covid-19 and the insecure situation in Afghanistan innovative and flexible approaches/methodologies and methods for remote data collection is highly recommended. Reflections upon any risks related to remote data collection should be included in the tender.

The evaluator is to suggest an approach/methodology that provides credible answers (evidence) to the evaluation questions. Limitations to the chosen approach/methodology and methods shall be made explicit by the evaluator and the consequences of these limitations discussed in the tender. The evaluator shall to the extent possible, present mitigation measures to address them. A clear distinction is to be made between evaluation approach/methodology and methods.

A *gender-responsive* approach/methodology, methods, tools and data analysis techniques should be used.⁵⁵

Sida's approach to evaluation is *utilization-focused*, which means the evaluator should facilitate the *entire evaluation process* with careful consideration of how everything that is done will affect the use of the evaluation. It is therefore expected that the evaluators, in their tender, present i) how intended users are to participate in and contribute to the evaluation process and ii) methodology and methods for data collection that create space for reflection, discussion and learning between the intended users of the evaluation.

In cases where sensitive or confidential issues are to be addressed in the evaluation, evaluators should ensure an evaluation design that do not put informants and stakeholders at risk during the data collection phase or the dissemination phase.

2.5 Organisation of evaluation management

This evaluation is commissioned by Sida, Unit for Afghanistan. The intended users are AREU, Sida, unit for Afghanistan and the Swedish embassy. The intended users of the evaluation form a steering group, which has contributed to and agreed on the ToR for this evaluation. The steering group is a decision-making body. It will approve the inception report and the final report of the evaluation. There will be two start-up meetings, one with Sida and the Embassy and one with the whole steering group. The steering group will participate in the debriefing/validation workshop where preliminary findings and conclusions are discussed.

The steering group might invite AREU's external consultant to the meetings and workshops. The external consultant will contribute to the drafting of a new strategic plan. The evaluation team is also requested to have a close dialogue with the external consultant, when feasible, to allow the two processes of drafting the new strategic plan and evaluated the current strategic plan to run smoothly in parallel.

2.6 Evaluation quality

All Sida's evaluations shall conform to OECD/DAC's Quality Standards for Development Evaluation.⁵⁶ The evaluators shall use the Sida OECD/DAC Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation⁵⁷ and the OECD/DAC Better Criteria for Better Evaluation.⁵⁸ The evaluators shall specify how quality assurance will be handled by them during the evaluation process.

⁵⁵ See for example UNEG United Nations Evaluation Group (2014) Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality in Evaluations <http://uneval.org/document/detail/1616>

⁵⁶ OECD/DAC (2010) Quality Standards for Development Evaluation

⁵⁷ Sida OECD/DAC (2014) Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management.

⁵⁸ OECD/DAC (2019) Better Criteria for Better Evaluation: Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use.

Annex 2 – Evaluation Matrix

Evaluation Question – Relevance	Specific Questions	Indicators	Sources of Information	Methods and Tools
<p>To what extent have the intervention objectives and design responded to beneficiaries' global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies and priorities and have they continued to do so when circumstances have changed?</p> <p>To what extent have lessons learned from what works well and less well been used to improve</p>	<p>To what extent was the support relevant in the context and did adjust to the evolution of the context?</p> <p>How have priorities been selected, in terms of thematic areas and research subjects?</p> <p>To what extent has the support corresponded with the goals in AREU's strategy?</p> <p>To what extent has the support corresponded with the (then) Afghan government development priorities?</p> <p>And to what extent has AREU's work been aligned to international strategic priorities in Afghanistan and in the region?</p> <p>To what extent did the support live up to the goals in Sida's strategy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - AREU work / research targeting the key needs in the countries - Existence of needs assessments and baselines - Level of adaptation of the AREU work to the change of context - Similarities / differences of the interventions funded with the strategies of AREU, Afghan government, Sida, international development stakeholders - Level of integration of the Sida cross-cutting issues in the needs assessments and design of the intervention - Level of revisions to adjust to the context and capitalize upon experience - Proportion of research products reliant upon local research capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project documents - Sida - AREU (if available) - Representatives of implementing partners organizations (if available) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document review - Interviews

and adjust intervention implementation?	<p>To what extent have Sida's mandatory perspectives been reflected in AREU's approach and work (gender, conflict perspective, human rights-based approach, environment perspective, and perspective of people living in poverty)</p> <p>To what extent have the interventions been revised to include what works well and less well?</p> <p>To what extent has it been relevant to have research capacity on the ground in Afghanistan?</p>			
Evaluation Question – Effectiveness	Specific Questions	Indicators	Sources of Information	Methods and Tools
To what extent has the intervention achieved, or is expected to achieve, its objectives and its results, including any differential results across groups?	<p>What result have been achieved to date? What could not be achieved as planned and why?</p> <p>What specific real difference has the activities made to the beneficiaries? Have certain groups benefited more or been negatively impacted upon more?</p> <p>What are the tangible outcomes (positive and negative) as a result of the intervention?</p> <p>To what extent did the AREU improved the process of producing high quality research in Afghanistan?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gaps planned / achieved at the different levels of the chain of results - Level of completion of the workplan and achievement of the indicators - New activities / way of working developed as a result of Sida funding - Level of identification of the key factors of success / underlying hypotheses and assumptions, and bottlenecks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project documents - Sida - AREU (if available) - Representatives of implementing partners organizations (if available) - Other donors / international organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document review - Interviews

	<p>What factors have either facilitated or hindered the achievements of the expected results?</p> <p>What are the indirect effects of the intervention positive and negative?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Level of integration of the equity perspective in the interventions and in the results - Examples of inequities / disbalances created by the interventions/ research - Examples of inequities that the AREU research contributed to identify and raise - Level of integration of the gender perspective in the intervention and in the results - Level of integration of the environment perspective in the intervention and in the results - Level of integration of the conflict perspective in the intervention and in the results 		
<p>Have the M&E system delivered robust and useful information that could be used to assess progress towards outcomes and contribute to learning?</p>	<p>To what extent has M&E documented the process and the achievements made during the intervention, including at the outcome level?</p> <p>To what extent was the M&E system efficient and used to adjust the interventions?</p> <p>To what extent has the 2013 evaluation findings and recommendations been taken into account?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Level of coverage and use of the M&E system - Level of accuracy and use of the indicators - Level of revisions of the interventions based on M&E data - Level of integration based on the 2013 evaluation - Integration of M&E indicators covering cross-cutting issues (gender, conflict, equity, environment, human rights, poverty) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project documents - Sida - AREU (if available) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document review - Interviews

Evaluation Question – Efficiency	Specific Questions	Indicators	Sources of Information	Methods and Tools
To what extent has the intervention delivered, or is likely to deliver, results in an economic and timely way?	<p>How well are resources being used?</p> <p>To what extent were the governance bodies effective?</p> <p>To what extent were synergies and complementarities optimized?</p> <p>Was there an effective coordination mechanism ensuring to limit duplications? To what extent were partnerships put in place with the relevant stakeholders, notably at regional level?</p> <p>To what extent has AREU's organizational set up contributed to or hindered the achievement of results?</p> <p>To what extent is the risk management system efficient and conducive to performance? How is conflict sensitivity included?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cost benefit analysis of the different activities - Level of effectiveness of steering committees, advisory board, coordination meetings, networks and platforms - Level of synergies between the different research projects - Examples of duplications with other research conducted - Level of coverage of the partnerships versus strategic objectives - Gender ratio among the staff involved and partners - Modalities to identify and conclude partnerships conducive to performance - Organizational processes of AREU conducive to performance - Level of capitalization on lessons learned and good practices - Level of accuracy of the risk management system and use in the interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project documents - Sida - AREU (if available) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document review - Interviews

Evaluation Question – Impact	Specific Questions and Indicators	Indicators	Sources of Information	Methods and Tools
To what extent has the intervention generated, or is expected to generate, significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, high-level effects with special consideration to Sida's five perspectives?	<p>To what extent the AREU managed to conduct research that informs policy and practices in Afghanistan? How has the research been used and by whom?</p> <p>To what extent is there a system in place to monitor the implementation of the research, coordination, dialogues recommendations?</p> <p>To what extent has the AREU contributed to wider effects in relation to Sida's mandatory perspectives (gender, the conflict perspective, the human rights-based approach, the environment perspective, and the perspective of people living in poverty)?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Number of quotations of AREU research - Number of references to AREU research in policies, strategies, and other programs - Examples of integration of AREU research recommendations / findings into policies and programs - Level of follow up of the recommendation's implementation - Examples of medium – long term changes on the cross-cutting issues as a results of the intervention - Level of integration of the cross-cutting issues in the impact and potential for impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Project documents - Sida - AREU (if available) - Representatives of implementing partners organizations (if available) - Other donors / international organizations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Document review - Interviews

Annex 3 – Data Collection Tools

The evaluation team has used a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative assessment of data from a range of different sources, including primary sources and secondary sources (including AREU's own documentation, procedures, reports, and research documents). This fed into an evidence-based analysis that involved triangulation of data from the various sources.

The evaluation has thus been conducted in a manner that is as inclusive and participatory as possible. A total of 37 individuals were interviewed through on-line methods (typically either Zoom or Teams). These included Sida staff, AREU management and researchers, former members of the Afghan Government, Afghan civil society, international human rights organizations, and AREU cooperating partners and researchers. These included individuals currently in Afghanistan and outside.

The evaluation team did not conduct any field research in Afghanistan due to the security and logistical difficulties associated with this.

The academic member of the evaluation team (Dr. Malek Sitez) undertook a quality review of a random selection of AREU research publications. As part of this, he also assessed the quality of translation (English to Dari and Pashto). The publications reviewed were:

The quality review and relevance level of AREU papers is based on the following reports:

- a. *Judicial independence in Afghanistan: Legal framework and practical challenges* 2021 Shoaib Timory
- b. *The Afghan Parliament: Constitutional Mandate versus the Practice in the Post 2001 Context* Dr. Shamshad Pasarlay and Zalmay Mallyar
- c. *A Study of Afghanistan's Organization and Structure of Public Administration under the 2004 Constitution* Mirwais Ayobi and Dr. Haroun Rahimi
- d. *When the Water Runs Dry* David Mansfield 2020
- e. *Surface-groundwater interaction in the Kabul region basin* 2020 Dr. Najibullah Sadid
- f. *The Helmand Food Zone: The Illusion of Success* Shahlla Matin 2020
- g. *Can the Afghan state intervene successfully in the conflict between nomads and settlers?* 2020 Dr. Antonio Giustozzi
- h. *A Taxing Narrative: Miscalculating Revenues and Misunderstanding the Conflict in Afghanistan* 2021 David Mansfield
- i. *Peace and illicit drugs at the margins: A borderland view of Afghanistan's SDG 16* Dr. Orzala Nemat August 2021
- j. *Drugs and development in Afghanistan* Adam Pain, Kaweh Kerami and Orzala Nemat February 2021

- k. *Cross-Border Production and Trade and How It Shapes the Political Economy of the Borderland of Nimroz* David Mansfield 2020
- l. *Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan* Anna Larson, Noah Coburn 2020
- m. *Technology & Humanitarian Aid in Afghanistan* Dr. Rodrigo Mena 2020
- n. *11 Years of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law*
- o. *A Literature Review of the Implementation of the EVAW Law (2009-2020)* Melissa Cornet
- p. *Understanding Men and Masculinities: Towards Creating Egalitarian Gender Relations in Afghan Society* 2021 Munazza Ebtikar

Annex 4 – Documentation

Year	Organization, Author	Title
<i>AREU</i>		
2019	AREU	Annual Development Budget
2019	AREU	Annual Plan for Fiscal year
2019	AREU	Annual narrative report
2020	AREU	Audit Report
2020	AREU	Annual narrative report
2020	AREU	Q2 report
2021	AREU	Annual narrative report
2021	AREU	Audit Report
2021	AREU	Annual Development Budget
2021	AREU	Budget Narrative
2021	AREU	Q3 & Q4 Financial Report
2020	AREU	Highlights July August
2021	AREU	Operating Annual Work Plan for Fiscal Year 2021
2021	AREU	Q2 report
2021	AREU	Q4 2020 and Q1 2021 report
	AREU	Board TOR
2021	AREU	Minutes of Meeting Board Q2
2022	AREU	Composition of the Board
2018	AREU / Sida	Agreement Sida / AREU 2019-2021 & amendment 4
2019, 2020, 2021	AREU	Analytics, all website data
2020	AREU	NGO / CSI Survey findings
2021	AREU	Publications list 2019-2021
2021	AREU	Media coverage and publication citation
2021	AREU	Risk records
2021	AREU	Final logframe
2018	AREU	Strategic Plan and Framework 2019-2021
<i>SIDA</i>		
2013	Tana / SIDA	Evaluation of Sida funding
2019	SIDA	Draft Strategy for the development cooperation with Afghanistan 2020-2024
2021	SIDA	Guidelines and pre-conditions for cooperation with Afghanistan as of 4th quarter 2021
<i>AREU Research</i>		

2021	AREU	Judicial independence in Afghanistan: Legal framework and practical challenges
2019	AREU	The Afghan Parliament: Constitutional Mandate versus the Practice in the Post 2001 Context
2018	AREU	A Study of Afghanistan's Organization and Structure of Public Administration under the 2004 Constitution
2020	AREU	When the Water Runs Dry
2020	AREU	Surface-groundwater interaction in the Kabul region basin
2020	AREU	The Helmand Food Zone: The Illusion of Success
2020	AREU	Can the Afghan state intervene successfully in the conflict between nomads and settlers?
2020	AREU	A Taxing Narrative: Miscalculating Revenues and Misunderstanding the Conflict in Afghanistan
2021	AREU	Peace and illicit drugs at the margins: A borderland view of Afghanistan's SDG 16
2021	AREU	Drugs and development in Afghanistan
2020	AREU	Cross-Border Production and Trade and How It Shapes the Political Economy of the Borderland of Nimroz
2020	AREU	Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan
2020	AREU	Technology & Humanitarian Aid in Afghanistan
2021	AREU	11 Years of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law A Literature Review of the Implementation of the EVAW Law (2009-2020)
2021	AREU	Understanding Men and Masculinities: Towards Creating Egalitarian Gender Relations in Afghan Society
<i>External documents</i>		
2020	Transparency International	Corruption Index
2016	Grant McLeod, USIP	Responding to Corruption and the Kabul Bank Collapse
2021	SIGAR	October 2021 Report
2021	Farakhabar	Tolo News Survey, October
2021	United Nations	Debate on the Fall of Afghanistan

Annex 5 – List of Interviewees

As agreed with Sida, and because of the nature of the assignment, the detailed list of interviewees is confidential.

The team interviewed 39 people and had several meetings with the AREU executive director and Sida.

The main categories are:

- 2 staff from Sida
- 1 staff from FBA
- 11 AREU staff and former staff, 3 external researchers,
- 2 board members, including former UNAMA head,
- 3 international academic partners & donors,
- 4 Afghan academic institutions,
- 7 Afghan CSOs and civil society networks,
- 2 media,
- 3 diaspora and international human rights organizations,
- 3 former Afghan government officials

The evaluation team did not interview anyone from the current de facto administration.



Evaluation of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, strategy period 2019–2021

This report presents an evaluation of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's (AREU) strategy period 2019-2021. The purpose was to evaluate the implementation of the strategic plan and theory of change and to evaluate AREU's organization and implementation in a complex environment. The evaluation found that AREU and the thematic focus of its activities have been relevant to the context and development needs in Afghanistan during the evaluation period, as well as international priorities, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The evaluation also found that AREU is an effective organization and produces research of a high standard that has contributed to increasing knowledge and policy in the areas covered. The report recommends Sida to continue to provide funding to AREU, to provide technical support to assist AREU in their design of their strategic framework and to use AREU's research to inform other interventions and synergies between various projects. AREU is, amongst others, recommended to increase the involvement of Afghan stakeholders in the Board, to consider developing new services and to strengthen further the capacity building of Afghan researchers.

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