



AFGHAN RED CRESCENT SOCIETY

**A neutral, impartial and independent ARCS,
reaching the people that others have no
access to**

Long-term National Society Development investments that strengthened the positioning, sustainability and impact of Afghan Red Crescent Society in a complex and fragile environment





1. Background

In 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit's **Grand Bargain Commitments set out the goal of "localising" humanitarian action.**

As its own contribution to localisation, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) defines National Society Development (NSD) as "the continuous effort of each National Society to achieve and maintain an accountable and sustainable organisation that delivers – through volunteers and staff – relevant services to address needs, reduce vulnerabilities and build resilience in a changing environment". NSD encompasses all aspects of the life of a National Society, including both what is referred to as Organisational Development and Capacity Strengthening / Enhancement. The policy defines these two interrelated areas as follows:

- **Organisational Development** is the part of NSD work that focuses on fundamental issues within the National Society: its mandate, legal base, identity, long-term strategic direction, basic organisational model, leadership drive, capacity to anticipate and adapt, and the relationships between different parts of the organisation or between the National Society and its environment, including the auxiliary role. Organisational Development recognises the interconnectedness of a National Society's different functions and levels, and their influence on performance and impact.
- **Capacity Strengthening / Enhancement** is the part of NSD work that focuses on improving existing services and capacities by making them more impactful, effective, widespread and better related to the National Society mandate and mission. This includes both strengthening areas of work that focus on community resilience and empowerment as well as strengthening underpinning systems, procedures and tools. (IFRC NSD Policy, 2022)

However, little is documented about how individual Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies local NSD investments strengthen their impact in line with the Movement's seven Fundamental Principles – in particular those of Neutrality, Impartiality and Independence – which exist to help staff and volunteers gain access, acceptance and trust in all communities and parties, especially in highly conflict-sensitive contexts. This case study was commissioned by a task force² of Red Cross Red Crescent Movement (Movement) members as part of a study of long-term National Society Development investments in fragile, complex, protracted conflict and violence-affected contexts³, to record the impact they are making and how they will inform future work. It shows how the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) has successfully, through NSD investments over the past 10 years, strengthened its unique positioning as a strong, principled, trusted, and local humanitarian organisation through:

- better services
- a more effective structure
- a more sustainable organisation
- a stronger capacity for both response and community resilience building.



1 Local humanitarian are often first to respond when disaster strikes and are often able to get to areas international staff and volunteers can't. Because they're within the affected communities before, during and after crises, they're better placed to both understand people's needs, and connect them to the right ongoing support. In 2016 the World Humanitarian Summit's Grand Bargain Commitments established a "Localisation Workstream" to "learn from successful localisation practices around the world" and introduce humanitarian processes that:

- Strengthen locally-led, accountable and principled humanitarian action
- Reset power balances between local and international actors, allowing local humanitarian to lead and deliver relevant, sustainable local services
- Use a more strategic blend of local to international resources to create more efficient, collaborative, speedy response, for more coordinated collective impact.

2 The taskforce was convened and led by the British Red Cross and comprised of the American Red Cross, Australian Red Cross, Canadian Red Cross, Danish Red Cross, German Red Cross, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

3 The term 'investments' refers all activities undertaken by a NS to strengthen itself, and any support given by partners to help achieve this, including money, time, expertise and other resources

2. Executive summary

"I would like to prioritise coordinating headquarters, regional offices, branches, volunteers and staff, developing common systems and processes, and recognising their different contexts, capacities and priorities – directly leading to increased and professionally delivered humanitarian services all over the country."

Mawlawi Matiul Haq Khalis, president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society

The Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) was formed in 1934. In 1954, it was recognised by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and became the 83rd member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. ARCS has continued to offer exemplary neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian service to people made vulnerable both nationally and internationally.

Taking an auxiliary role (in other words, performing a recognised public function), and supported by Red Cross Red Crescent Movement components, partners and national organisations, ARCS's work over the last 40 years has been within a context of highly complex, widespread conflict. The conflict caused vast internal displacement and civilian casualties, often impeding access to medical care.

With humanitarian access to those in need remaining challenging, ARCS has had to continuously adapt its approaches to reach and assist people in the most vulnerable situations. The team has continuously assessed the external environment and risks within it, investing in adapting its structure and processes to be able to deliver the Movement's Fundamental Principles. By developing dialogue with influential leaders of all parties to the conflict as well as of civil society, it has made its mandate and actions more broadly understood, accepted and supported.

The following figures show the increased numbers of people ARCS has reached thanks to NSD investments.

Measurable increases in people reached through	People reached in 2016 (baseline)	Total people reached over 5 years 2016-2021
Disaster Response (food and non-food relief items)	152,964	1,673,845
Medical services in ARCS Fixed Clinics and Sub Health Centres	2,252,702	11,592,509
Community-based Health and First Aid (CBHFA) training	306,206	4,577,379
Polio vaccination	0	1,226,561
ARCS Central Hospital	96,914	527,832
Congenital Heart Defect patients	1,000	7,923
Emergency health services (Mobile Health Teams)	862,850	4,430,094
Human Remains Transport Programme	336	6,527
Marastoon (social welfare centre) services	850	5,826
Education of children	344	1,482
Vocational training for widows/women	68	466
Restoring Family Links messages	2,736	10,201
ARCS's growth in capacities		
Volunteers and youth numbers	21,042	31,604
Members	7,340	14,021
Staff	910	2000
Emergency relief volunteers	2130	24,886
ARCS fixed clinics	46	46
ARCS Sub Health Centres	10	22
Branch Disaster Response Teams (BDRT)	0	22
BDRT staff and volunteers trained	0	550



Disaster Response Units (DRU)	0	7
DRU staff and volunteers trained	0	175
Mobile Health Teams	31	70
Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting systems	HQ only	All 7 Regional Offices & 34 Branches
Number of international and local partnership Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) signed	22	195

ARCS has supported an expanded number of fixed health clinics and Mobile Health Teams (MHTs) over the years, and grown the number of community-based volunteers delivering healthcare to people in conflict-affected areas. It also continues to distribute food and other essentials to families who have been displaced. This includes emergency distributions and longer-term projects such as livelihood support in agriculture and livestock.

To achieve this reach, ARCS has undertaken a significant range of NSD investment activities,¹ training staff and volunteers, and supporting communities to become more crisis-prepared and resilient, as well as maintaining and expanding humanitarian programmes. These investments have strengthened its visibility, and reputation, demonstrating its preparedness to respond, in times of crisis, to the needs of the most marginalised communities, and helping it become a widely accepted and supported organisation.

Building on decades of work, incoming ARCS leadership in September 2021 expressed the intention to expand its localisation objectives and reach. This included mobilising and training more community-based volunteers from vulnerable and violence-affected communities; expanding their skills and role in gathering local information on specific vulnerabilities and community needs; forming first response teams for future local crises; and having a better gender balance, with two out of every five volunteers in each village to be women.

NSD activities include:

- refreshing ARCS Law (with revisions incorporating updated auxiliary roles) to better deliver changing services through new, decentralised and locally empowered structures
- conducting more regular vulnerability and capacity assessments
- decentralising regional assets to better respond at a local level with speed and predictability
- strengthening volunteer capacities, moving from response-only activities to those that better involve and empower people facing risk in their own communities in becoming prepared and more able to adapt and cope in times of crisis.

This case study describes the many NSD investments made by ARCS and supported by its partners, that have been customised at key moments in response to demands of the external environment.

The organisation has been on a journey to provide, and be recognised for, humanitarian support no other actor can offer. Lessons learned from the work it has done can guide other Movement members in their own NSD investments, including:

- refreshing the legal basis (ARCS law and accompanying statutes – see section 7 (ii) for more details) cemented ARCS's auxiliary role alongside public humanitarian services, enabling support to reach more people, by making use of existing local structures.
- making sure the organisation incorporated and maintained the Fundamental Principles in all its work helped it gain access and acceptance by all parties to the conflict and deliver neutral, impartial and independent services to those who needed them most.
- the process of decentralising services and positioning assets, with the Grand Bargain commitments in mind, strengthened opportunities for community engagement, consultation, involvement, and accountability (for example, creating useful discussion with health clinics and disaster warehouses with prepositioned stocks)
- successive phases of work to strengthen Movement Cooperation and Coordination resulted in stronger and more coherent delivery of key services, although humanitarian services were sometimes challenged by a frequently changing staff and volunteer base.



3. Humanitarian context

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Conflict, drought, food insecurity, and displacement, as well as gaps in health services, have created a complex humanitarian crisis with widespread effects. The main ethnic groups in Afghanistan are Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimaq, Turkmen and Baloch³. More than 30 languages are spoken here, the official ones being Dari and Pashtu.

The country is ranked fifth most fragile country in the world by the INFORM Global Risk index (2018), and the 10th most vulnerable country to climate change (Notre Dame Global Adaptation Index 2021), with increasing events such as floods, droughts, avalanches and landslides. Ranked as the 12th most earthquake prone country, 59% of the population is also affected by climate shocks (World Bank 2016). A mean temperature rise of 1.08 C between 1950-2017 has had a direct impact on the availability of food, water, and spread of vector-borne diseases (those spread by living organisms like insects).

Contingency plans for public health emergencies are weak, and amid danger and displacement, communities are left unprepared. Very few people in high-risk areas have life-saving first aid, or even psychological first aid skills, while over 66% of the population has experienced at least one traumatic event and around half the population already experience depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress due to violence (National Mental Health Survey 2018). A high percentage of households are headed by women but, despite many women being main breadwinners, the 30% of women in the country who are in work earn 40-50% less than men.

Huge numbers of people are fleeing their homes. Over 72% of displaced households have been affected by conflict, but at the same time, with uneven socio-economic development and climate change impact across the country, many families are moving to cities due to the lack of rural employment and services. Informal settlements are growing in size and number, and poverty is rising.

The sheer scale of humanitarian need, summarised below, explains the high priority that ARCS has given to NSD investments, so that it can deliver neutral, impartial and independent support to the many people who need it.

Displacement and conflict

- Migration and displacement continue to pose enormous challenges, with 5.5 million people displaced due to conflict since 2012
- By December 2021 690,000 newly displaced people joined this total, 80% of whom were women and children (UNHCR)
- Approximately 79% of displaced households have insufficient sanitation and water access, 50% have no access to schooling for children, and 60% struggle to obtain food
- Since 2014, 4.2 million Afghan returnees (voluntary and involuntary) live in 11,400 settlements, leading to pressures on infrastructure, social services, and economic conditions

Livelihoods and poverty

- Livelihoods and coping mechanisms for communities have been weakened by years of repeated displacements due to conflict, climate-induced migration, and economic hardships
- Debt, and lack of access to credit and cash deny many the chance to restart livelihoods in rural, migrant and displaced communities. Widows and single mothers are even more vulnerable as the unemployment rate continues to increase
- 72% of young adults (under 25), who make up 66% of the population, lack employment opportunities, 39% lack education opportunities, and 19% suffer from mental health issues (Asia Foundation 2019)
- Populations migrating to urban areas face increased health risks including worsened air quality, heat waves and longer transmission seasons for infectious diseases

3 <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>



Health and sanitation

- A protracted health crisis contributes to the largest number of deaths (42.6 % – OCHA, 2021) being caused by communicable, maternal, prenatal, and nutrition conditions, with
 - o 18.1 million people (OCHA, 2022) in need of health services
 - o 10 million in hard-to-reach areas still going without access to health centres or services
 - o 3.7 million needing emergency health services (WHO 2020)
- Births attended by a skilled medical professional increased from 11% in 2003 to 59% in 2018, with the proportion of women receiving antenatal care rising from 16 to 65% (World Bank)
- However, only 51% of the population is fully immunised, infant mortality rate is still 46.5 per 1,000 live births (2021), and women here still suffer the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world (638 per 100,000 – UNFPA 2017)
- 22 Provinces have emergency levels of acute malnutrition, higher among displaced people, returnees, pregnant and lactating women, and children under 5 (OCHA 2020)
- Civilian life-altering casualties and trauma have left 4 million people with disabilities (REACH 2018)

Disasters

- 5 million children could be affected by earthquakes in unsafe buildings
- 1.2 million people were already displaced by 2019 as a result of disasters, with 5.3 million in need of shelter and non-food items (OCHA 2020)

The suspension of international assistance in August 2021 has resulted in around 24.4 million people (55% of the population) experiencing high levels of acute food insecurity amid conflict, COVID-19, high food prices, and rampant unemployment. This includes 8.7 million at risk of famine-like conditions, and 4.7 million children, pregnant and lactating women at risk of acute malnutrition.

While hostilities in the country have subsided significantly, the security situation remains precarious – not only due to lasting effects of years of a large-scale armed conflict, such as weapon contamination (e.g. landmines), but also due to the impact of sporadic incidences of violence and conflict.

There have been increased social tensions and anti-migrant sentiment as people compete for resources, especially in rapidly growing urban areas. This has created a protection crisis, undermining people's safety, security and wellbeing. Many previously displaced people are returning, voluntarily or otherwise, again increasing pressure on resources.

To adapt as an organisation amid these extreme pressures, ARCS's NSD investments strengthened its proximity, visibility, legacy, reputation, and integrity. The following chapters explore these.



ARCS volunteers in Balkh province are conducting door-to-door surveys in villages and districts to identify the most destitute and underprivileged members of the community and register them for assistance. 22/03/2022

4. Strengthening ‘proximity’

(i) Localisation

With a clear goal of maintaining **“a neutral, impartial and independent ARCS, reaching people others have no access to”**, the organisation focused on strengthening its local community presence and programmes, especially those with a disaster focus. Building the capacity of local volunteers who are present and visible in communities and understand specific local needs has helped sustain acceptance and access as a neutral and impartial humanitarian actor in its own environment.

NSD activities include:

- disseminating information about International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to all communities, on all sides of armed conflict, including bereaved families’ right to know the fate of their loved ones’ remains
- building branch and volunteer capacity to facilitate the transfer of human remains of those who have died in armed conflict to their relatives, so they can mourn in accordance with customs
- the building of 45 ARCS fixed clinics providing basic health services and first aid, together with Mother and Child and Adolescent Health Centres, Mobile Health Teams and hospitals, reaching people who would otherwise go without these services
- developing Sub-Health Centres in extremely remote and hard-to-reach areas, supported by partners such as the Norwegian Red Cross and Qatar Red Crescent
- expanding and supplementing the Ministry of Health’s immunisation and epidemic control services
- in its auxiliary role, providing health services and infrastructure in areas where the Ministry of Health could not reach those in urgent need, including wound dressing and nutrition services to check child growth
- maintaining local health centres that offer equal medical assistance to those on both sides of the conflict (for example, having active health teams in areas controlled by different parties)
- training volunteers in Community-Based Health and First Aid (CBHFA) to expand reach into communities, share information on health risks, and build familiarity with and trust in ARCS and the Movement as a neutral, impartial service
- expanding its first aid programme, established in 1997, to all 34 provinces of the country, covering 15,000 villages in 302 districts
- establishing Grandmothers’ Committees and Community Health Committees (the latter to also include younger females, see page 11 for more detail) to listen to a wider range of community voices and feed thoughts back into ARCS’s work (as sometimes females have not been allowed to speak to male colleagues directly)
- providing free treatment to 26,800 children with congenital heart defects throughout conflict-sensitive years.

There has also been intensified commitment to community resilience through community empowerment across all Strategic Plans from 2012 to 2025.

“Guided by the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, ARCS is a neutral, volunteer-based humanitarian organisation which provides relief to victims of natural and man-made disasters and helps the most vulnerable people and communities in Afghanistan prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies.”

Mission of ARCS, Strategic Plan 2012-2015



Helping to bring relief to the most vulnerable, Afghan Red Crescent teams conduct community assessments ahead of food distributions in drought-hit Bayman Province, west of Kabul.



“To contribute to humanitarian efforts for protecting life, health and human dignity, especially during disasters, armed conflicts, and other emergency situations; to contribute to building resilient communities, delivering services efficiently by mobilising diverse and well-developed volunteer and staff teams, guided by the principles of the RCRC Movement, especially neutrality, impartiality and independence.”

Mission of ARCS, Strategic Plan 2016-2020

“ARCS, as auxiliary to the public authorities, will provide timely humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable people, especially during natural and human-made disasters and other emergencies, in accordance with the Geneva Conventions and other relevant bodies of laws, and to disseminate information on International Humanitarian Law; strengthening a culture of peace in communities”.

Mission of ARCS, Strategic Plan 2021-2025

In a country where the health system has been deeply weakened by 40 years of conflict, ARCS clinics and Mobile Health Teams (MHTs) have proved to be essential localised services to bring communities to access primary health services. Together with Movement partners, and with a shared leadership approach, ARCS received and coordinated Movement assistance. It aimed to strengthen this service and deepen its localisation, with further emphasis on community engagement and accountability and prevention of gender-based violence. It also wanted to explore a primary healthcare service delivery model that is less dependent on external support.

ARCS's Strategic Plan 2016-2020 was a turning point for the National Society, when for the first time, external organisations such as the Afghan National Disaster Management Agency, UN organisations and others were invited to share vulnerability analyses and identify key niches for ARCS to fill with its auxiliary role. The resulting humanitarian priorities included:

- populations affected by conflict, disasters, socio-economic hardship and climate change
- safe expansion into communities living in areas where no other organisation can go to meet humanitarian needs
- communities without health services
- people who have been internally displaced and/or have disabilities
- communities facing natural disasters without early warning systems and first aid provision
- coordination with Government, all parties to the conflict, and other agencies through dissemination of messages and briefings to strengthen ARCS's auxiliary role and shared understanding of the Fundamental Principles
- further strengthening ARCS's legal base, and understanding of it both internally and externally
- strengthening ARCS's responsibility for five Marastoons (homes for destitute, often war-affected widows with children).

The numbers of people reached by ARCS as a result of sustained NSD investments in local capacities and structures are extraordinary. Between 2016 and 2020 it provided 17,732,134 support interventions to people through its services, including through 46 Basic Health Centres, 22 Health Sub-centres, 71 Mobile Health Teams (MHTs), one Hospital, and more than 20,000 trained community health volunteers. It treated more than 7,000 congenital heart defect patients, and continued working in all 34 Provinces, including in hard-to-reach and conflict-affected areas. Its preventive, primary and secondary healthcare services, clinics and community health mobilisers reached 718,749 people on World First Aid Day alone, with its innovative immunisation teams and eight Grandmothers' Committees carrying out local awareness-raising campaigns on hygiene promotion, health education about reproductive health and nutrition, and water and sanitation.

Between 2016 and 2020 ARCS national and branch Disaster Response Teams also reached 1,470,863 people with life-saving assistance including food, other essentials and cash grants, as well as with long-term risk reduction and crisis-preparedness operations.

Key NSD investment activities that have contributed to such expanded reach and impact include:

- ✓ undertaking ICRC's Safer Access Framework (SAF) assessment for strengthening safety and security systems (see section 5 for more details)
- ✓ recruiting and training community-based volunteers to strengthen community risk-reduction strategies, including routine infant immunisation in high risk / hard-to-reach districts
- ✓ community-based social mobilisation to enhance community acceptance and demand for immunisation, including polio vaccination
- ✓ contributing to more analytical data management and monitoring in insecure areas, including through digital tools, to better understand and meet people's needs
- ✓ training for post-campaign monitoring in high risk / hard-to-reach districts
- ✓ developing national disaster preparedness and response SOPs (standard operating procedures) to ensure vital, life-supporting systems operate to at least minimum standards
- ✓ humanitarian diplomacy skill-building for branch personnel collaborating with local Government agencies on disaster preparedness
- ✓ building awareness and understanding of ARCS's neutral, impartial, independent auxiliary role in prompt emergency response
- ✓ updating resource inventories, identifying and procuring relevant equipment, creating task forces, drawing up local action plans, strengthening alert/public awareness mechanisms, carrying out orientation, and drills
- ✓ investing in a comprehensive and strong disaster management structure
- ✓ focussing on assisting the most vulnerable people by building branch strengths in high-risk areas (e.g. prioritising development action in six provinces most affected by winter risk, and six most at risk from floods)
- ✓ building local staff and volunteer capacities to deliver psychosocial support (PSS) to people experiencing trauma
- ✓ maintaining 31 Mobile Health Teams to treat people in the most vulnerable situations and hardest-to-reach areas
- ✓ constructing local latrines and safe drinking water supplies to reduce the spread of disease



Kabul, Afghanistan: Patients and staff at the ARCS COVID-19 hospital in Kabul. The fully equipped facility enhanced hospital capacity in this city of 6 million. Red Crescent health facilities were incorporated in the pandemic response, providing screening and referral systems in some of the hardest-to-reach and least safe areas. More than 670,000 people were screened through Red Crescent mobile teams and clinics. 31 May 2021



ARCS has invested, over the past 15 years, to improve access, participation and training for women as well as men in socially transformative roles in communities. Its health programmes have proved consistent vehicles to empower women to address key issues, and to work with men to find solutions (for more detail see section 6 (iii) below).

(ii) Customising vulnerability and risk assessment tools for conflict-affected contexts

With the support of a number of consistent partners over the past two decades, ARCS has shifted from a disaster response organisation to one that builds community resilience, with capacities to better predict, respond to, and recover from conflict and natural disasters as well as health crises. This meant the building of services not just based in communities but also involving them.

ARCS has used a wide range of vulnerability, risk, and capacity assessment tools over the years, including DRCE,⁴ supported by the Canadian Red Cross. However, two unique, localised NSD investments emerged out of its community-based work: Grandmothers' Committees and Community Health Committees were established to strengthen community-based risk assessment and response mechanisms. Often located consciously in hard-to-reach, remote and conflict-affected areas, their roles were to build community resilience by mapping local risks.

Grandmothers' Committees aim to improve the public health and hygiene knowledge in remote areas as grandmothers are highly respected in Afghan society. The trained committees share health education, nutrition, and hygiene messages aimed at women, delivering important information which traditionally would be challenging to disseminate (including around family planning, and reproductive, maternal, neonatal and child health). Having respected members of the community share this information can drastically improve the quality of life.

Community Health Committees assess, plan and implement activities to raise awareness, and build skills, environmental support and policy development in support of community health and wellness. Each committee acts as the voice of its community and champions healthy living. Committee members aim to work with relevant health stakeholders to improve their local health situation, and to strengthen the capacity of their community to identify and respond to important health issues in their area – including the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised people. This all helps strengthen health systems, community capacity and equity, leading to better overall health outcomes.

(iii) Branch and regional office development

"We are now providing support, with the help of the ICRC, to 16 branches in sensitive conflict areas, in particular through community-based first aid. We have trained about 11,000 volunteers in first aid. The International Federation, within a wholesale Movement approach, continues to support the remaining branches. This network is perceived as a key element of ongoing efforts to ensure that the entire Movement has access to as broad a territory as possible, while providing an invaluable humanitarian service."

Ms Fatima Gailani, president of ARCS 2004–2016

In 2007–8 the then president of ARCS undertook an organisational transformation through the establishment of seven regional offices, each of which was intended to offer:

- stronger channels for the communication of consolidated community needs to ARCS HQ
- more localised capacity strengthening support to a group of four to six provincial branches
- delegated authority to this second layer of management
- improved communications between the service delivery points in branches and ARCS HQ through regional management teams
- reduction in the Secretary General's previous direct reporting lines from 34 provincial branches to seven Regional Branch Directors (reducing the risk of a 'bottleneck' effect slowing decision-making)

4 The Canadian Red Cross's Disaster Response Capacity Enhancement (DRCE) exercise helps to evaluate a National Society's preparedness and response capacity, testing its mechanisms and agreeing follow-up actions



- local experts to support branch capacity strengthening in areas such as disaster management, health, communications and finance, who could be more easily and quickly deployed to branches facing challenges.

Branch development played a vital role in institutionalising capacities of ARCS during periods of extended conflict and crisis in the country. ARCS has prioritised branch development as part of its localisation agenda since 2005. Until 2021, NSD investments in this area, supported by multiple partners, included:

Branch management training offered to all heads of provincial branches.

Learning workshops for all heads of provincial branches on how branch assemblies were conducted in 2015 to further disseminate the ARCS constitution, relevant policies, rules and procedures. These were also a forum to review branch performance.

Local branch governance training as an orientation session for new branch leaders. A team of facilitators were trained to provide a regular induction process.

Regular Meetings of all the heads of provincial branches.

Red Crescent Youth Development, ensuring a consistent approach to having an active youth section in the branches, directly supporting ARCS capacity to respond to emergencies and disasters.

Membership development. With regular ARCS assemblies in ARCS conducted only every four years, there was a risk of membership decline or disengagement. Involvement of the members in the branch development was an opportunity for ongoing engagement for the assemblies and heads of provincial branches.

Several ARCS processes and tools are aimed at a deepening localised risk assessment and first response capacities. A more integrated approach to NSD investment activities within disaster management (DM) programmes can be seen in the ARCS 2008-2012 DM Strategy which included the need for NSD investments such as:

- branch disaster response capacity strengthening, including provision of response equipment and training of volunteers and staff in needs assessments, developing executing plans of action, and dissemination of the code of conduct and rules of response
- recruitment and training of male and female volunteers and retention of skilled staff and volunteers
- community-based disaster preparedness training through volunteers, covering hazard mapping and early warning systems
- integrated multi-sectoral Vulnerability Capacity Assessment (VCA) skills for local branch staff and volunteers
- community dissemination and awareness work and local fundraising collection boxes to sustain local capacities

ARCS's SERDRC project – Strengthening Emergency Relief and Disaster Response Capacity of the Afghanistan Red Crescent Society – was established in cooperation with the Canadian Red Cross, Global Affairs Canada (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT)) and IFRC. It established a baseline for ARCS core capacities. Technical support from the Canadian Red Cross in planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER), and gender and diversity, introduced innovative data collection methods and analysis that enhanced the gender mainstreaming activities and the project's outcomes. The Canadian Red Cross programme team also transferred programme management skills to their ARCS counterparts and established a Programme Management Unit (PMU) which finally also strengthened ARCS's COVID-19 response. The IFRC's PER (Preparedness for Emergency Response) approach therefore provided a unifying framework, which took account of a variety of other Movement self-assessment processes, such as OCAC (Organisational Capacity Assessment and Certification). It offered a structured and standardised way of interacting with National Society systems and processes.



However, the Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment (BOCA)⁵ exercise of 2018 had a major impact on ARCS. Although it wasn't specifically adjusted to conflict-sensitive environments, it helped to identify and address branch needs in conflict-sensitive contexts. Branch leaders and personnel could share with HQ staff their priorities and best practices for sharing with other branches, and identify gaps in their roles during conflict and crisis. It also helped to identify organisational deficiencies – for example, whereas all branches had the same number of staff, some had far more work than others; some were good at local resource mobilisation, giving them income to deliver the neutral and impartial services that conflict-affected communities needed, while some were not.

The outcomes of the national BOCA report and analysis led to stronger volunteer networking, membership development, and capacity in advocacy skills to communicate with community leaders and the combatant parties.

The issues identified by branches affected by conflict were communicated, through ARCS HQ to the Movement Coordination Meetings. The advice sought and solutions offered strengthened ARCS's positioning as a neutral, impartial and independent National Society trusted by all parties to the conflict in the country.

Within its regionalisation strategy, ARCS decided to use the BOCA tool strategically, blending it with its own internally developed branch categorisation tool (designed to help branches identify gaps and development plans based on the type of context they're working in).

(iv) Adapting Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) to contexts sensitive to conflict

Conflict-based displacement has been a specific focus area for ARCS. It has recorded thousands of internally displaced families and worked with communities in close coordination with all involved groups, agencies and authorities to offer shelter, medication, and – in long-term situations – livelihood support. NSD investments in building Restoring Family Links (RFL) capacity with ICRC helped to reduce the risks of displaced families being separated by conflict and disasters. In 2019 this included ICRC support for an RFL assessment to assess ARCS's capacity to deliver these services.

However, the remaining tools that ARCS used were never fully adapted to conflict-sensitive environments. In 2016, ARCS used the Canadian Red Cross (DRCE) assessment tool to test its preparedness and response mechanism, and support system, but these were not specifically adjusted to responding in a conflict-sensitive environment

ARCS used the IFRC's PER⁶ approach in two cycles: in 2017 using the DRCE responses, and in 2019 to track progress. The objectives of PER are to “enable NSs to fulfil their auxiliary role, in line with the RCRC Fundamental Principles, by strengthening local preparedness capacities to ensure timely and effective humanitarian assistance to prevent and alleviate human suffering”.

Results showed clear progress in many categories of PER attributes, such as mapping of NS capacities, auxiliary role implementation, and response and recovery capacities. However, it also highlighted the need for capacity strengthening in key areas such as preparedness plans and budgets, scenario planning, emergency response procedures (documented SOPs), and pre-disaster meetings and agreements.



In Faryab province, photo of ARCS staff and volunteers assisting one of the beneficiaries after receiving cash assistance. 10/02/2021



In Faryab Province, the ARCS staff and volunteers can be seen providing cash vouchers to the beneficiaries. 10/02/2021

5 IFRC's BOCA is a self-assessment tool developed for NS branches to identify and assess their strengths, limitations and challenges in relation to a wide range of organizational capacities. It is used as a first step in a branch development process.

6 IFRC's PER is a self-assessment tool that enables NSs to systematically measure, analyse, prioritise and plan preparedness for response actions to ensure timely and effective humanitarian assistance in line with the NS auxiliary role and mandate. It considers all hazards (natural, biological, technological, among others) and is flexible for use in different contexts.

5. Strengthening 'visibility'

(i) Investments in volunteers and young people

"ARCS's volunteers were known and trusted by combatants from both sides, as they were permanent parts of their communities. Prior to 1997 people didn't know much about ARCS, only its Marastoon services. But after it expanded its community-based services people understood ARCS as a special national humanitarian organisation, helping people neutrally, impartially and independently. It was known to choose its volunteers in accordance with criteria such as not being affiliated with politics, having good acceptance and reputation in the community, and being from diverse parts of the community."

Partner National Society

ARCS's consistent NSD investments in volunteers and young people have led to strong local access and acceptance. As part of its planning over the past two decades, ARCS has recognised youth and volunteer engagement, education, women's empowerment and the mainstreaming of ARCS gender policy and minimum standards on protection, gender and inclusion as key areas of development across the National Society.

Its NSD investments included:

- ✓ adopting a series of **volunteering and youth policies** between 2009 and 2015, with the latest addressing the gaps (identified in the 2013 and 2015 OCACs), establishing:
 - o a volunteer management cycle including guidelines for recruitment and profiles, retention, training, safety and security, registration, and recognition
 - o youth programme and youth club guidelines, and a youth leadership development cycle.
- ✓ in 2013, adopting and customising the **Resource Management System (RMS)** to map where all ARCS's people and assets are, including volunteers, members, staff, warehouses, and offices. It would have been possible for this system to overlay maps of hazards, risks and vulnerabilities across the country, so ARCS could position itself in the places of greatest vulnerability, but unfortunately a lack of remote expertise support stopped this plan being realised.
- ✓ ensuring the RMS's **Volunteer Database Module** allowed for the continuous tracking of:
 - o volunteer awards and/or recognition
 - o volunteer mobilisation in specific roles, generating summary reports on:
 - the roles that volunteers did and for how long
 - time spent at individual level
 - time spent in each role and for each programme
 - consolidated volunteer time spent for the National Society.
- ✓ using BOCA in all 34 provincial branches to facilitate **individual branch assessments** regarding the numbers and needs of volunteers
- ✓ **disseminating the Volunteering Policy and guidelines** to all levels
- ✓ conducting a series of **volunteer management workshops/training** across the different levels of ARCS (a recommendation of the Swedish Red Cross review – see section (vi) below for more details)
- ✓ **basic training courses for volunteers**, with the development of volunteer curriculum modules
- ✓ **in 2015, undertaking a Volunteers Investment Value Audit (VIVA)** case study showcasing the role that ARCS volunteers play in dead body management and human remains transfer programmes. This was featured in the New York Times



- ✓ **youth volunteers' leadership camps** encouraging young people to be active in ARCS
- ✓ **in 2014, ARCS was the fourth largest user of the IFRC's Learning Network**, with a high percentage of volunteers making up the overall number of personnel benefiting from online courses.

Young adults (under 25), who make up two-thirds of the Afghan population, have known nothing but crisis and conflict throughout their lifetime. The Asia Foundation perception survey looked at the biggest problems facing young people in 2019. Lack of employment opportunities was by far the most cited issue (72%), followed by lack of educational opportunities (39%), personal/mental health issues (19%), economic concerns (15%), and violence/insecurity (9%). A combination of unravelling security, increasing poverty, and a lack of productive employment, have all contributed to a growing loss of confidence in the future.

ARCS's services are focussed on building local communities' capacities. Its NSD investments have enabled it to be a bridge between communities and its programmes. Community voices are represented by volunteers, committees, members and young people, and are fed back to the key disaster management and health service stakeholders in Afghanistan. Under its community-based disaster preparedness (CBDP) programme, the Society consistently provided three types of training courses to empower community volunteers and work with them on small disaster mitigation activities. This helped community members to draw up their own preparedness plans, and suggest ways of improving the community's long-term coordination with Government and non-government groups and organisations. Communities living in vulnerable areas have been involved in their own hazards and vulnerability assessment and mapping exercises.

Digitalisation was a key goal of ARCS's Strategic Plan 2021-2025, and NSD investments helped deliver:

- completion of an active youth and volunteer **database** that is being finalised in 2024
- development (or adaptation from another NS) of a **digital youth and volunteer management platform**, accessible for volunteers and including dedicated information and resources to ensure they are updated on ARCS activities, available tools and institutional development. This is also being finalised in 2024
- training for ARCS volunteers in using and feeding profiles and training data into the database and online management system.

(ii) 'Duty of care' considerations

"Our volunteers will have to have their uniforms. Sometimes they wouldn't wear them. Now we emphasise that their uniforms have to be worn. And we make sure that the items in our warehouses have to come from neutral countries if we want our assistance to be welcomed in some areas. Or it should come specifically from Red Cross or Red Crescent sources. Don't forget that war in Afghanistan, unfortunately, has been going on for the last 29 years, so people are familiar with the emblems."

Ms Fatima Gailani, president of ARCS 2004-2016

Strengthened mechanisms protect volunteers, promote psychosocial wellbeing and provide greater support for those killed or injured in the line of duty and their families.

Volunteer protection: ARCS has put in place a volunteer insurance scheme for ARCS volunteers active in delivering humanitarian services. Using ARCS's volunteer database, the system in place draws on an IFRC facility. To be sustainable, it will need to be maintained for all those eligible and expanded to cover all ARCS active volunteers.

Following the OCAC of 2013, ARCS's Safety and Security Department worked with ICRC's Cooperation and Security Advisor to customise and undertake a six-month risk assessment exercise, interviewing 76 personnel (34 volunteers and 42 staff) from 25 provinces, as part of the wider 2014 Preparedness for Response project. The report was used as a base to plan and develop an ARCS Security Management Framework.

The assessment made important findings, including:

- 90% said that dead body collection was one of the ARCS activities that facilitates its access by ARCS to remote and conflict-affected areas, as well as health and emergency medical services, dissemination of service information, and Restoring Family Links/tracing activities
- 74% said they were aware of the Fundamental Principles
- 84% said that staff and volunteers represented all ethnic and social groups present in the province
- 100% said they were equipped with ARCS emblem and logo, visible for the purposes of protection and identification
- 97% said that staff and volunteers were accepted by beneficiaries/communities in the province
- 99% said there was no ARCS policy or guideline regarding safety and security of staff or volunteers
- 28% said they had received Safer Access Framework training sessions.

The recommendations were as follows:

- ARCS should develop a policy and guidelines on safety and security for staff and volunteers
- field trip guidelines should contain use of emblems and logos, use of vehicles, notification and contact protocols
- all 34 branches and seven regional offices should be equipped for radio communication
- criteria for selecting neutral, impartial and independent volunteers from communities should be disseminated to the branches
- intensify dissemination of the Fundamental Principles and ARCS Emblem to all branch staff and volunteers
- increase Safer Access⁷ promotion sessions in the field
- psychological support should be provided to volunteers operating in and affected by disaster- and conflict-related contexts.

Several challenges remained in ensuring a higher level of safety and security for volunteers across the country. In 2009 ARCS agreed to a Volunteering Management Project integrated within ICRC and serviced by a Swedish Red Cross delegate, but there was an initial lack of recognition of the severity of security needs in conflict-sensitive settings:

“The uniqueness of implementing a Volunteering Management Project in an environment with serious challenges involved in working with volunteers, in a highly unstable context, were understated.”

Swedish Red Cross Review of Volunteering Management Integrated Partnership Project with ICRC 2012.



In the photo, a disabled person in Faryab province is seen exiting the office after receiving cash assistance. 10/02/2021

7 The Safer Access Framework (SAF) was first developed by the ICRC in 2002–3, in consultation with National RCRC Societies and the IFRC with the aim of helping NSs increase their capacities and preparedness to respond safely and effectively to humanitarian needs in sensitive and insecure contexts, including armed conflict and internal disturbances and tensions. ICRC. (2014). The SAF contributes to NSD by drawing attention to context-specific organisational weaknesses, through the lens of acceptance, security and access. Safer Access: A Guide for All National Societies. Geneva.



Although ARCS attempted to continue to strengthen a centralised approach to volunteering standards, most of the support it received from partners was not helpful in making specific adjustments to, or allowances for, the needs of volunteers in highly conflict-affected contexts. Although some of the recommendations stemming from a series of organisational assessments focused on the need for key NSD interventions, not all the reviews addressed the specific interventions needed in conflict-sensitive contexts. For example:

- a. ARCS established a new centralised Volunteering Management Department in 2009, and simultaneously started a three-year Volunteering Management Project (VMP) with support from the Swedish Red Cross under an Integrated Partnership (IP) model hosted by ICRC. Some modest advances were made (including a clearer registration process, and a policy framework and system for volunteer management). However, a review in 2012 did not acknowledge any conflict-sensitive aspect of the VMP, and declared that *“the IP partnership has been constantly challenged by lack of clarity regarding the roles among the partners, blocked communications within ARCS as a consequence of its internal management conflicts, human resources difficulties in finding the right profile of delegate at the right time, and sometimes lack of a coherent approach within the ICRC cooperation department in Afghanistan”*.
- b. A DRCE exercise in 2016 which recommended
 - i. “Determining equipment and support services (i.e. psychosocial support) required for staff and volunteers to respond appropriately, safely and securely”
 - ii. “NS lacks plans and procedures to ensure safety and security for staff and volunteers”.
- c. The Preparedness for Emergency Response (PER) report in 2019 (the second cycle, following the DRCE in 2016) which made recommendations on improved preparedness and response capacities, including:
 - i. Information management and data analysis, especially through the national emergency operational centre (EOC) to better inform operational decision-making
 - ii. Community engagement and accountability
 - iii. Effective dissemination and implementation of relevant policies and SOPs
 - iv. Safety of staff and volunteers
 - v. Ongoing monitoring and analysis of the disaster context
 - vi. Distribution of personal protective equipment and adequate response training for staff and volunteers at all levels.
- d. An OCAC in 2018, which said
 - i. “A formal safety and security assessment has to be conducted that will reflect the security policies and practices”
 - ii. “Security and Safety Management of ARCS should include a process of collecting security incidents, and doing a systematic analysis of such, which will inform the adjustment and or revision of existing security and safety policy and guidelines”
 - iii. “The National Society should ensure that practical guidance related to security is provided to all of its volunteers, that they receive appropriate security briefings and have a clear idea about their entitlement”.
- e. In 2018, a BOCA was performed in seven regional offices and 34 provincial branches which highlighted the need for strengthened “volunteer retention and recognition”.
 - NSD in Emergencies in 2019 identified the need for ARCS:
 - o to analyse preparedness for deploying volunteers in emergency situations with different scenarios and make practical arrangements for managing and protecting their volunteers in such situations
 - o develop specific emergency procedures for all relevant support services including volunteering, human resources (HR), finance, administration and logistics, which can be enacted immediately after a major emergency.



However, a large number of Safer Access trainings with ICRC support since 2016, aimed to assist ARCS staff and volunteers to analyse and minimise risk in conflict-affected areas, included recommendations and plans of action to implement stronger communications protocols to identify themselves, so as not to become targets.

Although ARCS's SAF journey started as far back as 2005, it initiated a serious review of its Safer Access capabilities in 2016, followed by reviews of progress in August of 2018 and November 2022. An ARCS SAF plan of action has guided several NSD investments to strengthen the organisation's positioning; minimise risks in conflict-sensitive contexts; achieve local acceptance and access as a result of analysing and mitigating risks; put the Fundamental Principles into practice in all work; and ensure safety and security across the organisation. NSD investments have helped:

- **establish an ARCS SAF Steering Committee** chaired by the ARCS Under Secretary General, and comprised of key internal directorates (DM, health, youth and volunteers, legal, safety and security, HR, branch development, planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER), and international relations), with ICRC and IFRC
- Build capacities for **Restoring Family Links (RFL)** with ICRC, including an RFL assessment in 2019 to evaluate and strengthen services
- **develop the Security Management Framework** to ensure organisational policies, SOPs, contingency plans and regulations are in place – supported by a Norwegian Red Cross delegate embedded within the ICRC delegation
- **promotion of the ARCS Safety and Security Unit to a Directorate** at ARCS HQ with 16 national staff
- **safety and security sensitisation** throughout programmes at all levels of ARCS
- **establish SOPs** for context and risk assessment, including training sessions in critical incident management planning; post critical Incident debriefing and staff care; Reporting Security Incidents; Networking framework; checkpoint behaviour; emergency lockdown planning; and infection prevention and access management at ARCS sites
- **recruitment of Safety and Security Officers** in seven regional offices and 34 provincial branches

The impact was immediate. Between 2019 and 2021 ARCS was the only organisation able to send trucks of humanitarian goods all over the country.

"After the change of government in August 2021 and the change in leadership levels across ARCS, many new leaders didn't know of the Fundamental Principles or SAF. We launched immediate orientations at all levels. During the establishment of the new Government, all ARCS staff, volunteers and assets were saved and not touched. A very small number of ARCS clinics were found not to be displaying ARCS's logo and "No weapons" signs prominently. We addressed these during the implementation of our refreshed checklists. The strengthened culture of security and safety among the staff and volunteers throughout ARCS led to a dramatic decrease of incidents (with no incidents reported in 2022)."

ARCS HQ manager

The subsequent SAF review in November 2022 led to further follow-up NSD investments in:

- provision of insurance coverage for 5,000 young people and volunteers through IFRC's Global Volunteer insurance system
- "Stay safe" courses for volunteers
- Safer Access training for selected branches most affected by conflict and conflict-sensitive scenarios, supported by annual national SAF Plans of Action
- PSS training for young people and volunteers through ARCS regional offices
- developing and disseminating a Code of Conduct for, and to be signed by, youth and volunteers
- establishing a volunteer recognition system which highlighted special volunteers in events such as world Red Cross Red Crescent Day, ARCS Special Week, World Peace Day and World Volunteer Day.



(iii) Dissemination and communications – the ARCS Emblem

“The ARCS Emblem identifies its volunteers, staff and assets in areas in conflict between different armed forces and groups. It prevents their misunderstanding and attacks on ARCS’s volunteers, staff and belongings, so that armed groups don’t stop volunteer-based humanitarian activities. This Emblem is an indication of neutral and impartial assistance to the victims of armed conflicts and people affected by disasters.”

ARCS – Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan dissemination leaflet.

ARCS’s Dissemination and Communications team has worked tirelessly through NSD investments over the years to develop, adapt and innovate dissemination and communications mechanisms to ensure the general population, combatants, and governmental and social institutions recognise and respect its neutral, impartial and independent positioning.

Supported by ICRC (in communication capacity enhancement, beneficiary communication, and production of materials), IFRC and a range of Movement partners, its dissemination mechanisms have included:

- ARCS’s local dissemination teams providing village level orientation on the emblem, the Fundamental Principles, its mandates and services throughout the country, especially before, during and after conflicts
- building the capacity of its national spokespersons to reinforce its neutral, impartial and independent position through mainstream media channels
- an ARCS Newsletter (recently made bi-weekly) covering its humanitarian services and achievements posting on social media in four languages
- more recently, in 2023, exploring Twitter as a means of communicating internationally with donors and media to emphasise its humanitarian messages and work.



An Afghan Red Crescent Mobile Health Team visits a community outside Kandahar. With their long history of supporting rural communities, ARCS’s mobile clinics continue to provide critical healthcare and lifesaving treatment for children and women in regional and remote areas of Afghanistan.

6. Strengthening 'legacy'

(i) Building on past perceptions and access

ARCS's legacy is founded on its continuous historical commitment to humanitarian emergencies and crises.

"ARCS has responded to disasters all over the country since its inception in 1934 through its humanitarian services that follow the Fundamental Principles. Its Disaster Preparedness and Response work is designed to reduce the impact of disasters on vulnerable communities, and to strengthen community disaster preparedness capacity, coping mechanisms, and hazard awareness. One of the largest relief activities was in 2008, when we distributed 80,000 food kits in two rounds to affected families in the north, north east, and north west of Afghanistan in the most drought-affected and insecure areas."

ARCS – Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan dissemination leaflet

ARCS has built a legacy based on its responses to several major emergencies, including the severe drought of 1998, four earthquakes in between 1998 and 2002, as well as severe winters and floods over successive years.

By 2008 ARCS had responded to more than 50 natural disasters in less than 30 years, which included floods, drought, earthquakes, landslides and avalanches.

Over time, its expertise has grown in preparedness, logistics, assessment, response, communication, logistics and reporting. Its services have come to be known for being faster than others, as it has consistently been first to offer support amid disasters that are now occurring almost every year, while the coping mechanisms of the Government and communities alike have been eroded by 29 years of war.

While conflict waned in 2008 onwards, ARCS focussed on emergency relief to address its lasting impacts. With approximately 3 million returnees and over 1.3 million internally displaced people in country, it played a visible role in identifying the needs and vulnerabilities within the country, and developing appropriate assistance projects in coordination with Ministry of Refugee and Repatriation, UNHCR, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and other key Movement partners. Vulnerability assessments took account of local needs depending on where people lived, their gender, and their socio-economic background. This helped ARCS become known for its localised, customised services to the most marginalised communities.

Since then, a transition from relief to development resulted in multi-lateral and bilateral donors gradually reducing humanitarian aid and increasing post emergency development assistance.

Work such as ARCS's health service expansion helps fill critical gaps for a population hit hard by successive disasters, but also strengthens services and infrastructure to better withstand future shocks.

The people of Afghanistan experienced the power of ARCS's neutral, impartial and independent services very visibly during the years of conflict. The transfer of dead bodies to both sides of conflicting parties, the restoration of family links, facilitation of messages from prisoners to their families, and provision of shelter, relief and food to people displaced by both war and natural disasters won widespread appreciation. Since the change of government in 2021, it now faces an important phase of consolidation of community acceptance and awareness of its neutrality, impartiality and independence.



An ARCS volunteer interviews a woman ahead of a cash transfer. Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, ARCS provided cash support to the country's most vulnerable communities.



"It is usually taken for granted that people see us as a principled organisation. But people may forget to make a proper distinction between merely action and principled action. When there was active conflict in our country the whole Movement was very cautious about the quality of our neutral, impartial and independent services as the safety of our volunteers and staff depended on it. Now is the time that we need to invest more in reminding people of our values, and separate our reaching out to everyone from targeting the most vulnerable and marginalised people and meeting their needs first. Being neutral can more easily be understood... having relationships with the authorities and all parties. But impartiality is the practice of serving those most in need, and the needs of the general population get blurred in peaceful times. We have to be even more careful not to be influenced by others, and to work using our independent surveys and analysis of who is most vulnerable."

Dr. Mohammad Nabi Burhan, secretary general, ARCS

Over 10–15 years, ARCS has focussed on integrated NSD investments that strengthened the reach and effectiveness of its community-based health and disaster preparedness and response programmes to build a legacy that gave it better access to communities, including:

- establishing a well-structured Disaster Management Department, and counterparts in regional and branch levels, in 1997 to reduce the impact of disasters on vulnerable communities
- establishing Community Health Committees supported by their local Branch Health coordinator who would communicate community voices and needs to ARCS HQ
- training armed forces in first aid and psychological first aid
- deploying a consistent number (24,000) of community-based health and first aid (CBHFA) volunteers (supported by two trainers in each of the 34 provincial branches) to mitigate health risks in remote and isolated communities, for example promoting safe hygiene in schools
- in 2023, piloting a set of 146 polio teams with a vaccinators and two volunteers starting in Kandahar region

(ii) Maintaining a Movement footprint

ARCS's national profile and legacy is based on local implementation of Movement-wide global commitments. Among these have been:

- the Hyogo Framework for Action agreed at the 2nd World Conference on Disaster Reduction⁸ IFRC's Strategy 2010, 2020, and 2030
- IFRC's Global DM Policy and its contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals
- IFRC's Asia Pacific Regional Conference Resolutions and DM Strategy

Such commitments, balanced with NSD investments to build organisational capacities to deliver at community level, led ARCS to transition from first responder capacities alone to a more balanced portfolio of humanitarian interventions. By strengthening branches and volunteers, it focused on strengthening community resilience, especially for communities affected by or recovering from conflict.

The mission report of IFRC's South Asia Regional DM Coordinator in 2008 highlighted the need for a Movement-supported ARCS Contingency Plan with specific coordinated NSD inputs:

"The proposed contingency plan is also linked to two significant aspects of preparedness. Firstly, integrated approaches to organisational development work in the area of branch development that build strong local, and ideally grassroots, gender-balanced and diversity-sensitive structures in areas of high vulnerability with an effective and focussed volunteer base and plans. Secondly, all programmes, human resource mobilisation and development work must incorporate strengthened conflict sensitivity in all aspects of ARCS's preparedness competencies – to be supported in an integrated approach by the ICRC Cooperation programme, with inputs such as Safer Access training, conflict sensitive first aid, etc."

South Asia regional DM coordinator

8 The Hyogo Framework for Action (HFA), is an Inter-governmental framework that has been endorsed by the International Federation's Governing Board. The framework has five key components: 1) Ensure that disaster risk reduction is a national and a local priority with a strong institutional basis for implementation; 2) Identify, assess and monitor disaster risks and enhance early warning; 3) Use knowledge, innovation and education to build a culture of safety and resilience at all levels; 4) Reduce the underlying risk factors and strengthen disaster preparedness for effective response at all levels

To manage its resources in a strategic manner, and to allocate its annual domestic income of approximately US \$ 11–14 million per year, ARCS has maintained a Movement footprint to be able to deliver its services nationwide. However, balancing its own resources with those of partners to support its personnel and structures has come with risks, and has generated some learning about sustainability.

In its conflict-sensitive contexts, ARCS took a decision to pay for all its HQ staff salaries from its own income in 2016. Previously, selected ARCS staff had been receiving ‘incentives’ from specific partners to attract them to deliver partner-supported programmes. However, although this change strengthened ARCS’s overall independence, it did not eliminate the practice of partners continuing to pay additional amounts to selected staff, and ARCS gradually transitioned back into a model in which selected partners can support part, or sometimes all, of a staff member’s salary for a defined amount of time, allowing a sustainability plan to take over the salaries with ARCS’s own income over time.

In the meantime, the humanitarian needs amid escalating conflict led to a different strategy to manage partners’ resources in a way that maintained a Movement footprint over the whole territory, but with programmes that were always perceived and promoted publicly as ARCS programmes. An example can be found in the Norwegian Red Cross support models which:

- support 113 of ARCS’s 225 nationwide health facilities (clinics, MHTs, hospitals, etc.)
- work with ARCS to jointly advocate alternative and more efficient health service models to those of the Ministry of Public Health, including agreements to pilot new approaches (such as one male and one female doctor in certain facilities in 2023)
- brought together ARCS’s water and habitat programmes (supported by ICRC), IFRC’s WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) programming in schools and communities, and work on the new Environmental Health approach by assisting ARCS to establish a WASH Unit in 2023
- strengthen ARCS’s supply chain and cold chain logistics capacities to scale up its vaccination and medicine services in traditionally remote, conflict-affected, and hard-to-reach areas
- are piloting a method of scaling up Emergency Mobile Health Teams (EMHTs) such as those deployed to support the needs of returnees from Pakistan in October 2023 onwards.



An Afghan Red Crescent Mobile Health Team visits a community outside Kandahar.



(iii) A new form of organisational development for risk and conflict-affected contexts

To strengthen its capacities, refresh its positioning and build on its legacy, ARCS undertook a phased organisational self-assessment at both national and local branch levels. This culminated in Strategic and Operational Plans to implement recommendations. Technical support and guidance were sought from the IFRC Country Delegation, Asia Pacific Zone Office NSD team, Swedish Red Cross, Norwegian Red Cross, Canadian Red Cross and ICRC as major partners/stakeholders in ARCS development.

In 2007, ARCS developed its first five-year (2008-2012) Strategic Plan and committed to regular long-term plans for 2012-2015, 2016-2020, and 2021-2025. The earlier two plans focused on capacity enhancement, and the latter two on NSD and organisational transformation linked specifically to deeper vulnerability analysis and the expansion of structures and services that adapt to the changing local needs of targeted communities.

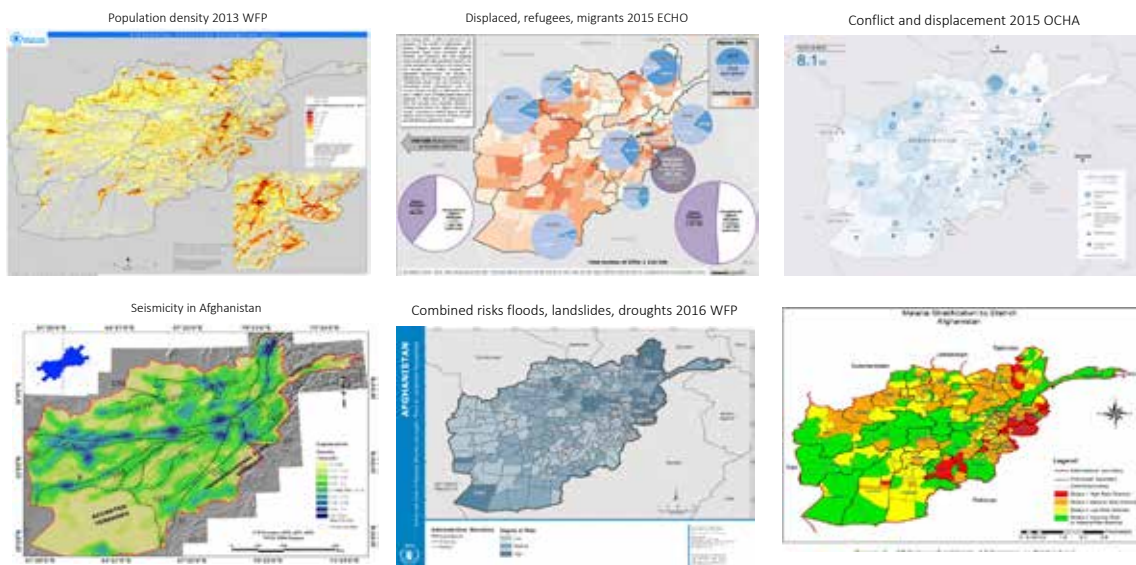
In October 2015 ARCS responded to the Badakhshan Earthquake, delivering neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian services in a highly conflict-sensitive environment. Inspired by its achievements, ARCS undertook vulnerability assessments to better understand how communities' vulnerabilities were affected by multiple hazards and risks. Using the Canadian Red Cross's DRCE⁹ tool, it deepened its contextual analysis, although conflict sensitivity was already engrained in its approaches.

"ARCS used DRCE to look at how it could remain true to the Fundamental Principles in conflict-sensitive environments. Its neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian credentials were already evident – for example by working in "hard-to-reach areas". It didn't have to isolate conflict-sensitivity from its other work as it came naturally."

IFRC

During the subsequent Strategic Plan formulation stages, a number of external institutions were invited to share their own vulnerability and risk assessments processes, and to propose both sectoral and geographical areas for ARCS to focus its future services on, so as not duplicate existing services, but also to reach those no other institution could reach. The process defined a clear niche and strengthened auxiliary role for ARCS.

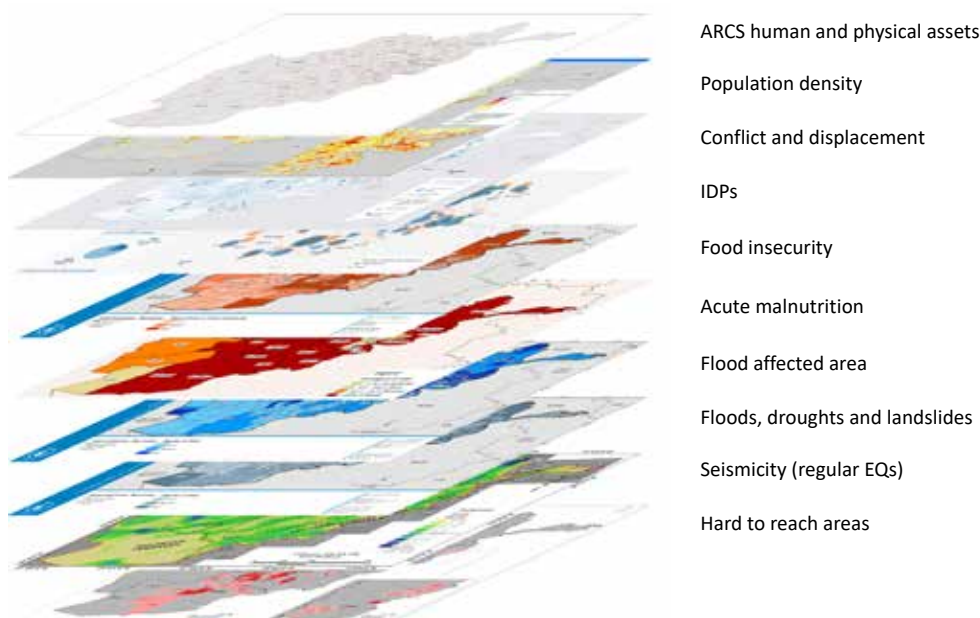
Conflict-sensitive assessments include the scale and location of displacement, positioning of MHTs and clinics in remote communities unreachable by permanent services, and community-based preparedness programmes.



9 DRCE findings were used to create a plan to build capacity in preparedness and response mechanisms and support systems. The plan was supported by the Global Affairs of Canada under the project called the Strengthening Emergency Relief and Disaster Response Capacity/SERDR of the ARCS (1 April 2013 to March 30, 2019 for CAD\$15 million).

By overlaying ARCS's Branch network map on these multi-hazard, risk and vulnerability maps, ARCS sought to ensure the relevance of customised programmes related to specific communities' needs.

Multi hazards, risk and vulnerabilities across Afghanistan



The resulting Strategic Plan 2016-2020 demonstrated a more focused approach to risk-informed decisions and planning of recovery activities in conflict- and disaster-affected communities. Programmes began to integrate multisectoral approaches with a focus on disaster risk reduction and livelihoods, and cash-based intervention in participation with targeted communities. These included promoting disaster- and health-risk reduction messaging in schools and communities, through volunteers including young people, and in partnership with the Ministry of Education.

To support these objectives ARCS's NSD investments have included:

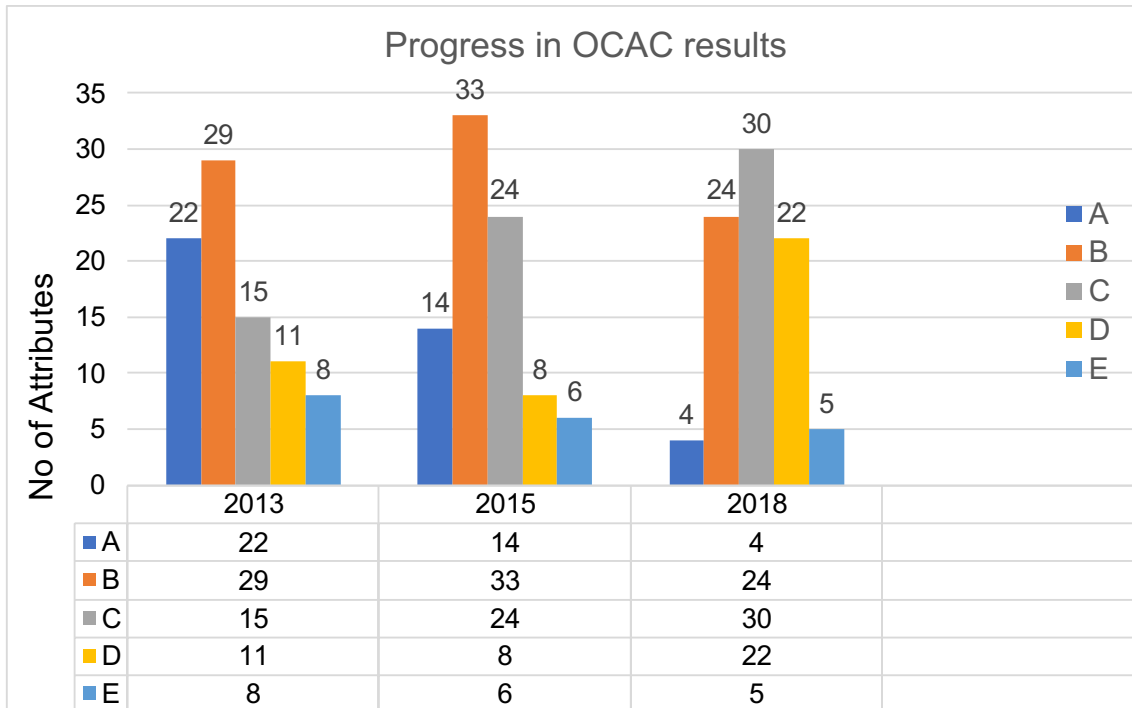
- reviewing its disaster risk management strategy and multi-hazard contingency planning
- skill and capacity enhancement in: applying vulnerability and capacity assessment tools, context analysis, and multi-sectoral resilience programming, for ARCS volunteers and technical staff
- implementation of resilience programming and scaling up programmatic development
- partnership development on resilience programmes as well as early warning early action
- engagement of volunteers, including young people, on disaster risk awareness and education in schools and communities
- targeted services by province for specific needs (this approach was furthered in the Strategic Plan 2016–2020, with specific targets to help communities in the most vulnerable locations).

Although ARCS's senior leadership were keen to prioritise self-assessment processes such as OCAC (in 2013, 2015 and 2018) BOCA, DRCE and SAF as the foundations of an organisation-wide change process, the tools were never merged or used strategically together to provide a collective analysis that would lead to a unified and harmonised approach to branch development.

With great persistence, ARCS leadership undertook three OCAC processes in order to measure progress in the 94 areas of institutional capacities. The OCAC report of 2018 clearly indicates steady progress in line with recommended improvement. While 40% of work was rated as above the benchmark C level in 2013, the progress in 2018 had grown to 67%.



The following graphs show the overall progress made between the three OCACs:



Looking more closely at the attributes that scored at the A or the B level (the 'deficits'), it becomes evident that they are clustered around some core issues:

- Human Resource management
- Volunteer Management
- Communication, both external and internal
- Safety and Security
- Financial System and management
- Institutional Policies
- Insurance

As a result of the OCAC processes, ARCS developed a variety of policies and regulations, and undertook a BOCA Branch self-assessment with a view to better implement the strategic directions.



When winter bit across Afghanistan, in some cases with deadly consequences, IFRC supported ARCS to distribute winter kits (with winter jackets, sweaters, shawls, wraps, gloves, caps, socks and boots) for affected people in Giyan district of Paktika province.

7. Strengthening ‘reputation’

(i) Legal base foundations

“ARCS is well placed to engage with the public authorities and other stakeholders, including the international community, through our unique role as auxiliary to the public authorities in the field of humanitarian activities and upholding of the Geneva Conventions. We re-affirm our intention, to assure our Movement partners, that we will continue to strengthen the delivery of integrated services to people most in need.”

Dr. Mohammad Nabi Burhan, secretary general, ARCS

The Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) was founded in 1934 to alleviate human suffering and provide support to the victims of man-made and natural disasters all over Afghanistan. The first official constitution of the ARCS was adopted in 1952, clearly defining the role of the Red Crescent. The auxiliary role of ARCS was officially recognised by the government of Afghanistan and the national society was considered a legal entity. The International Committee of the Red Cross officially recognised the ARCS on 2 September 1954. By 11 November 1955, the ARCS were accepted as the 83rd member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and as such became a formal part of the world’s largest humanitarian network: the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

“Some armed forces had their own humanitarian work, with units like the provincial reconstruction teams. They were mending and building roads, building bridges, building wells. They were refurbishing clinics and hospitals and schools, or even building them from scratch. We had to let them do what they could. But they possibly also engaged in military operations, blurring the lines between humanitarian and military action. Because of our volunteers, who come from every village, every province, every district, we could reach the remote areas. Often, the military took it for granted that we should help them distribute the food or medicine or whatever they had. It was hard for them to understand that we cannot do so. We have to maintain our neutrality.”

Ms Fatima Gailani, president of ARCS 2004-2016

While maintaining its neutrality, impartiality and independence, a wide range of national level MoUs over consecutive Governments have been signed with Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Education, Finance and Telecommunications. ARCS also maintained, over the decades, clear understanding with all parties to the conflict.

“ARCS has faced huge challenges to our neutrality and independence over 40 years of war, but we’ve achieved it. In the last 10 years, not a single ARCS facility has been attacked by Taliban forces. Our local level NSD investments in volunteers, dead body exchange, and providing medical equipment and services impartially to both parties of the conflict showed our neutrality, independence and impartiality. We often had to oppose Government instructions too, stressing our independence. In this manner we could play our auxiliary role and still be respected by Taliban and other forces. When engaging in our annual ARCS “Special Week” of fundraising, we have sold all our fundraising tickets each year, showing the trust and confidence of the people of Afghanistan, and their willingness to support such a neutral, impartial and independent organisation.”

ARCS HQ Senior Director

Its NSD investments in expanded auxiliary services through strengthened volunteers and branches also won the respect of all parties to the conflict as well as of local populations. That trust in ARCS drew long-term support from the British, Canadian, Danish, Finnish and Norwegian Red Cross, and increasingly from Qatari, Turkish, Saudi Arabian and other Red Crescent Societies.



A Dissemination Officer for the ARCS Daykundi Branch providing information to the community about ARCS and its goals.



“Our strong auxiliary role, further clarified in our revised ARCS Law of 2016, resulted in successive Governments issuing instructions to all Ministries and Directorates to respect ARCS’s mandate and expedite whatever official work and support it needed from customs, airports, Ministry of Interior permissions etc. Our foreign funding sources have never been challenged by parties to the conflict either. For example, in the past our ARCS clinics in Kunduz and Khost, in Taliban held territory, were funded by Qatar Red Crescent but later transferred to Norwegian Red Cross support. Although we were not strong in the media at that time, our actions proved neutral and impartial. On another occasion, an acting President was passing through an active battle between Taliban and Government forces, and at the local branch’s request to the Commanders of both parties, the conflict stopped to let him pass, and then carried on afterwards.”

ARCS HQ Senior Director

(ii) The auxiliary role and its interpretation

“We decided what independent systems and services we needed to develop, and used many NSD investments to keep our systems different and distinct from those of Government.”

ARCS HQ Senior Director

ARCS never used its auxiliary role and law to gain Afghan Government funding. An important example of its humanitarian advocacy to remain distinct from Government machinery was its long-term permission to abstain from the Government’s Procurement committee, which is normally chaired by the President of the State. Instead, with strengthened separation clauses in its updated Law of 2016¹⁰, the ARCS Governing Board has been given the authority to oversee major procurement, to develop its separate policies and procedures, and to use different financial management systems such as Navision (see section 7 (iii) below for more details).

As a result of its law and auxiliary roles, ARCS has signed a variety of cooperation agreements with various Ministries (Education, Higher Education and Youth) to work in schools, universities and communities. Through a variety of NSD investments, it strengthened branches, trained volunteers, and grew access and acceptance through negotiation skills with parties to the conflict.

Since 2008, ARCS has been an officially recognised member of the National Disaster Management Commission coordinated by the Afghan Government, performing duties within its own impartial rules, regulations and structure. To fulfil its auxiliary roles ARCS has:

- ✓ worked with the Government’s Department of Disaster Preparedness (DDP) and with UN agencies and several NGOs in planning, disaster preparedness and response
- ✓ mobilised staff and volunteers at all levels to respond to emergency situations including its community-based first aid (CBFA) volunteers, emergency mobile units (EMU), disaster response units (DRU) rapid response mechanism, and youth and volunteers department’s assets through an integrated approach
- ✓ developed national language training materials on disaster management, based on regional standard curriculum from 2003 onwards and with support from IFRC and sister societies from Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Further modules were added in 2006 on CBD training of trainers and disaster response
- ✓ focused on developing links with schools/colleges to raise awareness
- ✓ strengthened infrastructure for improved communication within and outside ARCS, including staff visits to sister societies and post-disaster ‘lessons learned’ workshops
- ✓ developed an expanded immunisation programme in coordination with the Afghan Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and in close liaison with the polio eradication programme

¹⁰ National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies exist in 191 countries, protected by a national Red Cross or Red Crescent Law that recognises them as voluntary aid societies, ‘auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field’, and respects their adherence to the Movement’s seven Fundamental Principles: Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality, Independence, Voluntary Service, Unity and Universality.

- ✓ expanded cold chain capacity so that new life-saving vaccines could be introduced and vaccination coverage increased through a coalition of key international partners including GAVI, WHO, the US Centre of Disease Control, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and UNICEF, and through a growing contribution from ARCS supported by IFRC in hard-to-reach and insecure areas
- ✓ identified needs and vulnerabilities among 3 million returnees and over 1.3 million internally displaced persons in 2008 and developed appropriate assistance projects in coordination with the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and other key partners. ARCS is still in the learning processes of responding to population movement.

ARCS established critical health partnerships with the US Centre for Disease Control (in 2017) and GAVI (in 2020). These allowed its immunisation teams to reach more than 376,000 children under one with routine vaccines, while 196,870 children under five received polio vaccines through a door-to-door campaign. In 2019, ARCS, together with IFRC, signed an MoU with the Ministry of Public Health emphasising ARCS priority interventions in areas affected by deep conflict, and other hard-to-reach areas.

Since 2012 ARCS has also continued to be supported by IFRC to build on analysis and review under Internal Disaster Response Law (IDRL) to strengthen its application in the Afghan context. As part of the South Asia disaster law programme, ARCS was enabled to further review existing laws and policies at national level including for climate, disaster risk management and emergency preparedness and response, and for public health emergencies.

Through disaster law and contributions to legislative advocacy work, and humanitarian diplomacy and partnership engagement at large, ARCS strengthened its auxiliary role. There was a further review of potential gaps in existing disaster-related law and policy frameworks in 2021.

ARCS used NSD investments to build humanitarian advocacy skills and widen its influence over other humanitarian organisations and networks. Although ARCS works independently, it strengthened coordinated approaches with key ministries and all external groups to address gaps and improve its impact. Its investments in local capacities and rapid volunteer deployment have cemented its position as a member of the National Disaster Management Commission (NDMC) at all levels, the Advisory Body of the Afghan Humanitarian Fund, and all Humanitarian Inter-agency Clusters – health, WASH, food security, and the Cash Working Group.

In the highly charged conflict-affected environment in the months leading up to the ISAF withdrawal from March 2021 onwards, ARCS responded with neutral and impartial services. These included its Human Remains Transportation Programme (H RTP) which transferred dead bodies to both parties of the conflict. The retrieval of sometimes hundreds of bodies per day strengthened appreciation of ARCS's positioning with commanders and combatants on both sides.

“The humanitarian impact of the NSD investments in Mobile Health Teams (MHTs) over the years could be seen visibly. ARCS delivered its services without any impediment and MHTs were one of the indicators. Sometimes suspended during active combat hostilities, ARCS used “access negotiators” to clarify misunderstandings. For example, it turned out that one complaint about inappropriate behaviour arose from doctors and nurses of mixed gender sitting in the same vehicles. The solution was to have men and women segregated in the front and back seats. Neither party would ever suspend their activities for more than a week”.

IFRC



ARCS teams map the needs of people affected by multiple crises such as internal displacement, conflicts, and drought. Balkh, 19 February 2021.



Following the establishment of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in August 2021, ARCS's new leadership has committed to continue strengthening HQ and branch staff and volunteer knowledge and skills in humanitarian diplomacy, partnership development, and innovative resource mobilisation at all levels. NSD investments in Humanitarian Diplomacy accelerated the positioning of ARCS as a neutral, impartial independent national humanitarian organisation. The Strategic Plan 2021–2025 ensured a better balance of analysis about the emerging environment in the country. A notable example of this is that ARCS leadership confirmed that as a national humanitarian institution with its own protective law, it could continue its gender-related work, unaffected by the IEA's ban on women working in the INGO sector.

Its commitments to protection, gender and social inclusion continue to be implemented through the female volunteers and staff in its health services, MHTs, and Marastoons. In 2023, ARCS distributed emergency cash grants to more than 24,000 female-headed households, and included provision of vocational training for women while strengthening their income generating capacities in a context where other women's vocational training centres have been closed.

"The implementation of neutrality and independence sometimes means pushing back. But where, as a result of NSD investments in legal base work, dissemination and personnel capacity building, auxiliary roles to the public authorities are properly understood, it can have extraordinary humanitarian impact. On 10 August 2021, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Afghanistan, the Turkish Red Crescent sent an oxygen plant to ARCS to support patients in its clinics and hospitals. The Taliban were in control of the crossing point on the Herat border. ARCS called the commanders of all forces in both parties to the conflict along the route to Kabul and the consignment passed through all checkpoints without any interference or bribes, arriving safely on 13 August."

ARCS HQ senior director

This focus on strengthening the understanding and implementation of ARCS's auxiliary roles has led to impressive increases in resource mobilisation. With the cessation of armed conflict since August 2021, these have included options to revisit some financial support from the public authorities for ARCS's neutral, impartial and independent services by:

- advocating with Government Utility Ministries (telecommunications, electricity and water) to reduce the tax tariff for electricity and water, saving ARCS significant expenditure
- disseminating a signed letter by the ARCS President to all IEA Authorities and Directorates advocating for a percentage of their budget to support ARCS's humanitarian activities as a result of which, in 2023, ARCS is receiving 30 million Afghani per month from passport fees.

"In recognition of our importance as a neutral, impartial and independent national organisation, in May 2023 the Afghan Prime Minister made a personal public announcement encouraging all IEA and other institutions in the country, as well as the people of Afghanistan, to donate to ARCS during its "Special Week" to support its widely respected humanitarian services."

ARCS HQ senior director

(iii) Promoting a culture of social inclusion and peace

Over 20 years, migration and displacement in Afghanistan have been driven by a mix of conflict, environmental, and economic issues (such as chronic poverty, reduced coping capacities, lack of investment for rural communities in agriculture and value-adding industries such as fruit processing plants). Since 2014, more than 4.2 million Afghans have returned, both voluntarily and forcibly, from abroad to over 11,400 settlements across Afghanistan, increasing pressure on already limited infrastructure, social services and public structures. An IOM study in 2020 revealed that 72% of displaced households have been affected by conflict and that 80% of said active conflict or violence was the "final push" that made them leave, while 76% of cross-border returnees said they felt forced to leave.



Tensions can also frequently arise between returnees or displaced people and host communities, mostly due to increased competition for resources and job opportunities. In response to these critical trends, ARCS's NSD activities included:

- developing ARCS strategy on migration and displacement
- focussing on programme planning with interventions that deliver longer-term outcomes, along the humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach, by focusing on socio-economic integration and enhancing social cohesion through livelihood interventions for both displaced and host communities, including in hard-to-reach areas
- mapping out risks and anticipating population movement in order to adapt its preparedness and contingency planning, in close liaison with RCRC partners, public authorities and in-country coordination platforms
- using its widespread local presence in communities through its volunteers, youth members, and local relevant services based on needs, building the trust, understanding, and support of local communities
- ensuring its consistent values by modelling socially inclusive youth and volunteer engagement, education, women's empowerment, and equal access to ARCS's services, thus promoting tolerance, a culture of non-discrimination, non-violence and peace
- ensuring that ARCS's Gender Unit fed into the 2016-2020 Strategic Plan, mainstreaming gender and diversity (G&D) into all aspects by holding a specific G&D sensitisation and mainstreaming day, and assessing, analysing and amending drafts from a G&D perspective
- using its Gender and Diversity Policy and Strategy to monitor gender statistics and make better operational decisions, implementing minimum standards on protection, gender and inclusion across the organisation and in our programmes.

ARCS has also worked with IFRC technical support since 2021 to integrate questions relating to CEA (community engagement and accountability) and PGI (protection, gender and inclusion) into the initial assessment questionnaires to ensure the specific needs of the affected populations based on gender, disability and other diversity factors are considered and are used to tailor response.

The main objective of the checklist was to ensure that the emergency programming of IFRC and ARCS ensured dignity, access, participation, and safety for all people affected by disasters and crises. The checklist also applies in longer-term programming.

ARCS's 31 youth clubs and 'youth corners' in HQ and across 31 branches have been continuously supported with capacity-building for young people on social inclusion subjects and school subjects, reaching a total number of 8,970 youth members, male and female. Youth club members provide free education, language and computer support to non-school attendees, showing parents and communities the neutral, impartial and independent support ARCS offers. Youth capacity building has given young students the ability to contribute to the country's development, and to decrease the vulnerability of young people to drug addiction and recruitment by armed groups.

"Therefore, people in communities know ARCS and how we are working. Once they know us, it's easy to gain access to communities, and mobilise volunteers even in conflict-affected areas, as community volunteers are already in contact with local commanders of armed groups."

ARCS HQ Senior Director

ARCS youth clubs are also a platform to leverage friendship and peace among young people and their circles, for example through sports activities. Young people can also benefit from psychosocial support, with many coming from communities that experience different types of violence.

Social inclusion is one of the topics youth educators are trained to deliver within the youth clubs and youth corners in schools, promoting co-existence and a culture free from violence and discrimination.



By having a higher number of female staff and volunteers, as well as Youth as Agents of Behavioural Change (YABC) using youth corners, ARCS has modelled social inclusion for communities. With the support of RCRC partners, it has cultivated youth leadership through the rollout of YABC across its provincial branches, using the existing youth corners as an entry point to enhance young's people knowledge, skills and inclusive behaviours.

NSD activities in this critically important area have included:

- ✓ mobilising young people as YABCs with IFRC support focussed on
 - o expansion of diversity among youth (boys, girls, minority groups)
 - o encouraging young people to be role models among peers, to demonstrate non-discrimination, non-violent behaviours, promoting acceptance, tolerance, social inclusion and mediation
 - o introducing young people to the Movement's Fundamental Principles and values, and to 'learning by doing'
 - o expanding membership of ARCS Youth Clubs and promoting peer education
- ✓ a five-day training offer on IFRC's global YABC toolkit, customised to the Afghan context
- ✓ intensive investments in youth volunteers, and formulation and management of youth services
- ✓ capacity building in self-development areas such as communications, facilitation, empathy, non-violent communication, non-discrimination and respect for diversity, social inclusion, violence prevention, mitigation and response, motivation and learning, peer education, and skills development.

ARCS has also maintained a consistent commitment to meet its auxiliary role mandate to maintain and develop its five Marastoons (or social welfare centres). These aim to strengthen socio-economic inclusion of a wider range of female-headed households, often including people traumatised through conflict experiences, with vocational training, livelihoods support, income-generating activities and savings groups, as well as community engagement and advocacy protection, and gender and other inclusion as a driver of social cohesion. Over the decades the Marastoons have supported 5,826 people considered most vulnerable, including widows and people with disabilities. Its community-based services demonstrated that community participation is a right for all.

ARCS's community-based health programme (CBHP) and approach have been expanding across provincial branches with support from the Finnish and British Red Cross. Complementing formal health systems, it targets communities on the periphery or outside the system to ensure they are not excluded from essential life-saving services. This approach requires locally-led solutions, with activities designed and conducted with and by communities to meet their self-identified needs, priorities and potential.

Reintegrating the large percentage of the population who have experienced trauma is another key ARCS target. ARCS has focussed on NSD investments that include scaling up volunteer and staff capacity in psychosocial support (PSS) activities, supported by the Danish Red Cross, Norwegian Red Cross, ICRC and IFRC to address overwhelming needs across a country traumatised by decades of war. Further advancement in 2019, complementing PSS activities through CBHP, included the mainstreaming of PSS by a new dedicated PSS structure within ARCS's health department. It led to expanded activities including further training of trainers and master trainers to enhance PSS understanding and skills across ARCS facilities and community volunteers, and the establishment of a nation-wide PSS hotline.

ARCS has drawn on further strategic support to its clinics under Norwegian Red Cross technical coordination with a focus on gender-based violence and improved reporting. Extended support to ARCS's regular MHTs was also achieved under Canadian Red Cross technical coordination with a focus on more structured community engagement and accountability and gender-sensitive approaches.

Intensified approaches to community engagement and accountability (CEA) investments through ARCS's Gender Department, established in 2015, have strengthened protection, reduced feelings of powerlessness, and enabled affected people to contribute their ideas, knowledge, capacities, skills and resources to rebuild self-esteem and confidence in themselves and their communities. ARCS has invested in mainstreaming

CEA, including through well informed feedback mechanisms, across the full spectrum of its emergency operations. It has also done so in its longer-term interventions to build resilience for people on the move, displaced people and host communities. With funding support for an ARCS CEA Officer in HQ, ARCS has also been supported, especially through its PMER team, to include disaggregated data on internally displaced people and returnees when reporting on emergency preparedness, response and recovery activities.

Aiming to further improve on its approaches based on lessons learned, ARCS aims to continue to deepen CEA and ensure gender and diversity perspectives in its structures and services by including two women in every five volunteers in the 54,000 villages across the country in the next phase of its organisational development. This will deepen the role that women and girls play in preparedness, response and recovery from emergencies and conflicts, and in building peace within their respective communities.

Thanks to NSD investment activities in volunteer training and expanded branch services, ARCS has been able to:

- ✓ gain access and acceptance in some of the communities most affected by conflict
- ✓ expand volunteer coverage and recruitment and training modules on Movement history and Fundamental Principles, roles and mandates, emblems, roles and definitions of volunteers, code of conduct, first aid and other health-related topics.



Afghanistan is in the grip of one of the worst droughts and food shortage crises in decades, threatening an unrivalled humanitarian catastrophe as a bitter winter looms large for millions of Afghans. The Afghan Red Crescent Society, with IFRC's assistance, delivers winter survival kits in some of the hardest hit provinces for those suffering shortages and loss of income.



8. Strengthening ‘integrity’

(i) The role of ARCS’s statutes

“We wanted to expand our local base of community members across the country from 2010 onwards. Through membership, people could see how they could contribute to the NS, its structures, and their role in it. ARCS’s Human Remains Transfer Programme made it known and accepted to people and all commanders and combatants everywhere. They saw how our organisational values were embedded in our branches, volunteers, members and actions.”

ARCS HQ director

In 2016 ARCS was successful in updating its ARCS Law. The new law clarified strategic aspects of its functioning.

Guided by the new Secretary General, with the full support of the President and Governing Board, a new phase of transformational work began through NSD investment activities focussed on conducting provincial branch assemblies, establishing seven regional offices, increasing the youth volunteer base and their involvement in the decision-making process at different levels, and providing a clearer focus on gender equality. The following section gives details of how ARCS’s constitution evolved through attempts to include respected people at grassroots level in its structures and elected leadership at all levels into the future.

(ii) Refreshing governance at all levels to oversee a decentralised branch network

In 2005 onwards, ARCS’s President noted that those in government were influencing appointments, sending their own people to take up ARCS positions, and that provincial governors were overstepping boundaries with aid distributions. ARCS’s senior leadership approached the State President to propose a system relying on an elected ARCS President, not from politics or public authorities, but elected by a principled local leadership.

A committee was formed to draft regulations on who could be an ARCS member, and the framing of profiles that would be non-religious, non-political, trusted by local communities as neutral and impartial, and diverse by ethnicity and language group, representing the whole population. The roles of members were to uphold, promote and practice the Fundamental Principles; respect and follow the mandate of ARCS; be devoid of a criminal background; be active advocates of ARCS’s roles and responsibilities; and give active voluntary humanitarian service in return for a membership fee of 50 Afghanis.

In order to test the profiles in practice, ARCS recruited members and held an initial five subsequent provincial assemblies to elect fresh provincial governance in 2005-2006. The successful results enabled ARCS to set targets for further membership drives in the remaining 29 provinces as part of its Strategic Plan 2008–2012, to be guided by trained trainers supported by IFRC. The final aim in the Strategic Plan was to hold ARCS’s General Assembly in 2012. The completion of the remaining 29 provincial branch elections enabled three members from each elected provincial board to represent their province at ARCS’s first General Assembly in 2012, of whom one at least should be female. The agenda for the refreshed governance at the three-day General Assembly included:

- reviewing and agreeing changes to the 82 Articles of ARCS’s constitution to include these new governance arrangements, supported by IFRC and ICRC
- agreeing a first national budget and plan
- an agreement to adopt the revised constitution and hold the next General Assembly after five years agreements that all 34 new provincial Governing Boards should come to Kabul for orientation
- agreement that the 10,000 newly mobilised members should refresh national governance, with three provincial elected representatives attending national meetings (of whom at least one should be female)
- agreement that provincial assemblies thus played a mediatory role between the branches and the local communities in terms of gaining credibility and support for ARCS.

As part of a long-term localisation process, ARCS's provincial election processes strengthened its accountability to its members and the communities it serves, identifying and involving people who wanted to involve themselves in the ARCS's decision-making processes.

Meanwhile, the drafting of a new ARCS Law, which was finally promulgated in 2016, allowed ARCS greater independence of action, supported by the constitutional vision of more independent and self-elected governance at province and national levels. 17% of elected members representing their communities in provincial branch assemblies were female, elected as branch Governing Board members. However, the percentage of potential female leaders was higher in ARCS's 21 youth clubs, 50 youth corners, and in YABC training, where 43% of the young volunteers attending were female.

Building on the decades of organisational development and capacity-strengthening work of ARCS, the incoming leadership of September 2021 expressed its vision of expanding ARCS's localisation objectives and reach. This includes mobilising five volunteers in each of the 54,000 villages of the country (including local influential elders, leaders including two women). The aim is to train more community-based volunteers from vulnerable and violence-affected communities; expanding their skills and roles in gathering local information on vulnerability and community needs; forming first response teams in future local disasters and crises.

The vision also includes a mixed governance model in which the above village volunteer groups elect representatives to attend 34 provincial assemblies. These in turn will elect those they have confidence in to represent the province, eventually proposing the new leadership of ARCS, which may be a mix of elected and selected people, to ensure the Fundamental Principles of the National Society are respected by all those in national leadership positions.

(iii) Strengthening transparency and accountability

“Some 10–12 years ago ARCS was basically strong but running on a manual system. In 2017/18 the Norwegian Red Cross adapted some aspects of the IFRC's logistics manuals and worked with ARCS and IFRC in Afghanistan to help ARCS develop its enhanced procurement and fleet manuals. After using the IFRC's National Society Logistics Capacity Enhancement (NSLCE) tool, ARCS then adapted the Navision online system, integrating assets, fleet, warehouse and stock inventory systems. The Norwegian Red Cross assisted ARCS in establishing warehouses in two regions and IFRC and ICRC with Rubb halls [shorter-term tent-like buildings] in the other five regions. Provincial branches would continue to hire local shops or warehouses when necessary.”

IFRC



Afghan Red Crescent Society teams provide cash assistance to households affected by flash floods in Laghman province. With the support of the IFRC, ARCS distributed cash assistance to 400 households, with each family receiving 10,000 Afghanis. Giving cash to people affected by disasters is an effective, efficient and transparent way of providing humanitarian assistance to people in the most vulnerable situations, allowing them the freedom, dignity and independence to decide on their own recovery.



In its efforts to gain trust and acceptance from communities, Government stakeholders and armed groups, ARCS has made consistent NSD investments in strengthening its transparency and accountability through more effective management of its resources.

Its expanded human resource base and strong nationwide structure of 34 provincial branches, seven regional offices, and a fluctuating staff number of between 400 and 2,000 since 2011, have supported its local daily humanitarian work. These have been guided by regularly refreshed policies, procedures and systems as a result of using DRCE (2016), IFRC's Organisational Capacity Assessment and Certification (OCAC) (2013, 2015, 2018), Branch Organisational Capacity Assessment (BOCA) (2018), Safer Access Framework (SAF) (2016 onwards), and Disaster Response Capacity Enhancement (DRCE)¹¹ assessment (2016). It has invested in strengthening its Internal Audit Policy, logistics SOPs, and planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER) standards.

Recognising the need to demonstrate strong financial integrity with all parties to the conflict and external donor institutions, ARCS has focused on finance development (FD) processes over the years, including:

- migrating from a fully manual system in 2003 with a large team having to manage ledgers, cash and banking reconciliation, to a team with newly recruited qualified accountant personnel
- adopting QuickBooks software in 2004 (meant for small businesses) and then migrating to Microsoft Navision software in 2005 with the support of the Norwegian Red Cross and IFRC's South Asia Regional Finance Development Manager
- intensified IFRC support in the form of a locally recruited FD Officer who supported ARCS to visit other NS and customise Navision to its specific needs
- expanding Navision functionality to link to ARCS's logistics systems
- training ARCS finance officers in regional offices and all 34 provincial branches
- revising and developing a new ARCS Finance Manual in 2010–2012
- initiating audit discussions to assess and improve the quality of financial reports generated by Navision, and take measures to mitigate the chances of fraud and corruption
- developing checklists for Working Advances (WAs) due to significant scale-up of amounts to CHF 2 million due to external humanitarian crises and scaled-up conflict-sensitive programmes
- completing the first Audit Statement (2015–2018) which raised discrepancies requiring solutions (e.g. vendors in operational areas of conflict couldn't produce written invoices)

Further NSD investments were made by ARCS's senior leadership to strengthen transparency and accountability standards with the support of partners through strengthened coordination mechanisms. These included:

- a commitment to identify irregularities, and agree a joint system with IFRC for resolving them
- convening a monthly coordination meeting with IFRC, ICRC and all Movement partners to identify and solve issues and strengthen precautionary measures against fraud and corruption
- establishment of the PMER Unit in 2008
- introducing a clear Project Agreement in 2015 which was expanded to all projects, programmes and partners, specifying budgets, funds, frequency of reports, and eligibility criteria for receiving Working Advances
- recruiting a new Director in 2016 to relaunch the PMER capacity strengthening goals, who established a baseline of people reached from 2016 onwards together with gender disaggregated data gathering from that point onwards
- further strengthening regional office and provincial branch systems using the gaps identified in systems and capacities by the OCAC and BOCA processes
- establishing a PMER Strategic Framework in 2018 with the support of the Swedish Red Cross
- recognising that evaluation systems were weak, establishing a monitoring and evaluation section in 2018 with the support of IFRC, with 10 personnel to conduct training of trainer sessions in all provincial branches

11 From April 14-18, 2016, the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS) used the Canadian Red Cross DRCE assessment exercise to evaluate its preparedness and response capacity in order to: (1) test its preparedness and response mechanism and support systems (SOPs, systems, etc.); and (2) contribute findings to the baseline of its current preparedness and response capacity, enabling them to prioritise and plan actions for improvement.

- initiating monitoring checklists with the Ministry of Public Health in 2019 to monitor ARCS's health clinics and MHTs, followed by reviews and recommendations to improve systems further
- strengthening beneficiary exit interviews and some level of Post Distribution Monitoring (PDM) to 2,400 households in 2019, resulting in a 'lessons learned' workshop with the heads of all branches
- a subsequent workshop in 2020 on implementing anti-fraud and corruption mechanisms
- introducing digitalisation and information management capacities including RedRose¹² and KoBo¹³ training in the ARCS DM Department, especially for cash transfer programming, from 2019 onwards, and fully implemented gender disaggregated data collection
- framing a Transparency and Accountability Programme Agreement with IFRC in 2023 as a result of surveying PDMs between 2021-2023.

There were, however, further areas of optimisation required which are still in process, including:

- the lack of clear PMER focal points in branches, required by the PMER Strategic Framework, which had been assigned to second line management rather than to technical personnel
- the lack of clear community accountability and engagement (CEA) focal points in branches, and the lack of a CEA Policy to incorporate CEA into daily operational programming as a cross-cutting issue (although work has been initiated with support from IFRC – see later in this section)
- the lack of sustainability of systems such as the Resource Management System (RMS) and the IFRC's Disaster Management Information System (DMIS); IFRC and partners who developed these systems only discussed and developed them with technical level counterparts, rather than seeking ownership and strategic management of management information systems from ARCS's senior management first who could then have assigned relevant staff.

Whereas IFRC and Norwegian Red Cross support had been aimed at strengthening the overall financial capacities of ARCS, ICRC's FD interests were more focused on capacitating specific personnel in ARCS to be able to provide ICRC with required financial reports. ICRC used its own unique Due Diligence Assessment tool for this, and acknowledged the manner in which ARCS moved up from Level 1 to 2 (out of 3). However, in order to ensure that ICRC's independent approach to FD benefitted from ARCS's wider approach to strengthening its systems, the leadership of ARCS invited it to participate in the regular monthly Movement coordination meetings.

In relation to the above, ARCS has continued to take NSD actions that build on its local planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER) capacities. New initiatives have aimed to ensure transparent and accountable reporting of its services, performance, and accountable use of resources both to the communities it serves and to stakeholders supporting its work. This continues with the current leadership. Some of these capacities include:

- establishing ARCS's Gender Department in 2015 with the support of IFRC and the Norwegian Red Cross
- strengthening CEA and PGI¹⁴ capacities with the support of IFRC's newly established Quality and Accountability (Q&A) Department from December 2021 onwards with the aim of ensuring Q&A mainstreaming into all long-term as well as emergency response operations
- continuing to seek IFRC support through its Senior Community Engagement and Inclusion Officer for the reactivated ARCS Gender Unit with its five staff with financial and technical support (translating contextualised CEA and PGI orientation and planning packages into Pashto and Dari such as PGI and CEA assessment tools in emergencies using IFRC's Minimum Standards for PGI in Emergencies)
- customising ARCS's CEA and PGI framework using Islamic teachings
- training 126 staff of ARCS in 2022 at regional and branch levels on CEA and PGI (including 16 females) using the contextualised packages

12 RedRose is a data management platform that integrates with data collection tools to manage data (e.g. beneficiary details, market price, monitoring, PDM surveys) and with payment mechanisms (e.g. mobile money, remittances, e-vouchers).

13 KoBo toolbox is a set of mobile tools that allows National Societies' staff and volunteers, IFRC and ICRC to collect data on services

14 PGI includes three terms: (1) Protection – keeping people safe from harm – no-one left unsafe, (2) Gender – understanding and analysing different needs, capacities and risks of individuals based on their gender (and age, disability etc.) – no-one left behind and (3) Inclusion

– addressing inequalities between people – no-one left out. PGI ensures people's dignity, access, participation and safety. It encompasses and deals with inter-personal violence, discrimination, marginalisation, neglect, exploitation and abuse, unfair treatment, and people's inappropriate behaviour towards others.



- ARCS PMER tools for Post Distribution Monitoring, exit interview, and site observation were reviewed jointly with IFRC, with CEA and PGI related questions integrated into the tools
- a four-month CEA and PGI integration plan was developed in consultation with ARCS and IFRC in the earthquake-affected provinces of Khost and Paktika, including the training of 120 volunteers in both provinces, and awareness raising in local communities on eligibility criteria especially for cash distribution and shelter requirements
- the ARCS Gender Unit team cascaded gender-based violence training to build the capacity of branch staff in nearby provinces including Kabul and Panjsher
- ARCS relevant staff including gender, health, DM and PMER were oriented on the CEA and PGI training, and 'training of trainer' cascading plans with budgets were agreed to train remaining staff in regions and branches
- ARCS health and WASH staff, and Partner National Societies (PNS) including the Turkish Red Crescent, Norwegian Red Cross, and Danish Red Cross were provided with support and involved in rapid assessment and proposal development for an ECHO programme (especially in the development of indicators)
- CEA tools were shared with the Finnish Red Cross for the new four-year CBHFA programme, using existing platforms such as Grandmothers' Committees, WASH Committees, and Community Health Committees to be oriented on CEA and PGI
- PGI minimum standard checklists were developed for emergency health, shelter, WASH, livelihood, cash-based assistance, household items support and disaster risk reduction.

To counter ongoing Government interference in ARCS appointments, ARCS's new law sought to separate it from state institutions even more clearly. At the same time, ARCS needed new ways of managing professional recruitment and development of its staff. In 2016, ARCS's NSD activities therefore also included an HR transformation project, initiated with technical support from a Danish Red Cross Regional HR Development specialist located within IFRC's Regional NSD Unit in Kuala Lumpur. The objectives of the HR Transformation Programme as stated by ARCS's senior leadership at the time included:

- ✓ developing a new ARCS organigram that would enable it to deliver its new strategic Plan 2016-2020
- ✓ addressing two components – HR management and HR development
- ✓ a two- to three-year roadmap was initiated under each as follows:
 - o **HR management** – addressing “right sizing the NS to deliver its SP; developing and updating all policies and procedures; new recruitment guidelines (implemented by an ARCS HR Transition Committee chaired by the President and comprising the Secretary General and directors of HR, operations, DM and health, who oversaw all recruitments in the first year; refreshing all job descriptions; agreeing redundancy plans and terms; reviewing salary and increment systems through a market analysis
 - o **HR development** – developing an induction programme; career development planning; performance review system; training needs analysis and enhanced role of a Training Department to refresh courses.

ARCS has witnessed a number of changes in personnel over the past two decades. However, its organisational culture includes systems established by those who have served longest in the National society – sometimes 15–25 years – to ensure that, even if the people change, the programmes and services continue. With the strength of neutral, impartial and independent values in its long-term diverse volunteer and staff base, new people are gradually absorbed into its organisational culture.

ARCS has grown as a trusted partner of multiple external humanitarian institutions including:

- Afghan public authorities, especially the **Ministry of Public Health** (tripartite MoU on immunisation, close cooperation on COVID-19 response), the **Ministry of Education** (tripartite MoU on WASH in schools programme) and the **Afghan National Disaster Management Agency**.
- **GAVI** for an immunisation programme targeting communities in hard-to-reach areas covering six provinces, also in partnership with the Afghan MoPH.
- **US Centre for Disease Control** for a polio eradication and immunisation programme targeting communities in hard-to-reach areas covering six provinces.
- **USAID** for the strengthening of ARCS readiness to respond to emergencies (RED READY), with a focus on five branches in at-risk provinces.
- **Afghan Humanitarian Fund** (UN-managed, pooled fund) for cash-based livelihood support to remote communities in one province, and to support MHT outreach in five provinces.
- **ECHO** for emergency response, with a focus on hard-to-reach areas.

Dialogue has also been ongoing with **international actors** including the World Bank, WFP, IOM, UNICEF and WHO, as well as prominent **diplomatic representations**.

ARCS/IFRC has also increased its engagement with **UN-led mainstreamed coordination mechanisms** across the country, especially relevant sectoral clusters (health, food and livelihoods, WASH, nutrition, protection) and working groups (cash and vouchers, community engagement and accountability, gender-based violence and more), as well as within the **Humanitarian Country Team and the Afghan Humanitarian Fund Advisory Body** (as observer).



A food distribution for people affected by drought, poverty, and conflicts. Kandahar, December 2021.



ARCS's incoming senior leadership of President, Vice-President and Secretary General from August 2021 onwards have continued to emphasise and strengthen its transparency and accountability. NSD investments were mobilised through programmatic streams. For example, the ongoing 'Red Ready' programme, supported by USAID, which aims to invest in stronger ARCS Branch Disaster Response Teams (BDRTs) and enhanced readiness to respond to crises and disasters. This capability will address the many complex situations confronting vulnerable people today, including sudden-onset, seasonal, human-induced and protracted crises, as well as the ability to intervene at community level and enable effective and lasting solutions to urban challenges.

IFRC's country office continues to offer support on further enhancement of ARCS's capacities and systems for transparent and accountable emergency response. Special emphasis is placed on timely needs assessments and operational learning, including improved information management and use of pre-crisis and in-crisis data and context analysis. Efforts will also be paid to reinforce ARCS's accountability system (PMER, finance) as well as logistics development, including through framework agreements with suppliers for in-kind or cash-based response as well as pre-positioned stocks at local and regional levels.

While making use of IFRC global and regional tools and instruments for emergency response and forecast-based action, including for resource mobilisation (emergency appeal, DREF) and surge deployment, the country office will also aim to support ARCS's communication and resource mobilisation in emergencies, including through digital fundraising and a domestic surge mechanism. ARCS has also scaled up cash- and voucher-based assistance as a pivotal component of its DRM strategy to enable ARCS's 34 branches to deliver cash-based response



Helping to bring relief to those who need it most, Afghan Red Crescent teams conduct community assessments ahead of food distributions in drought-hit Bayman Province, west of Kabul.

9. Strengthening Movement cooperation and coordination – building collective impact

As part of its long-term strategic planning processes, ARCS has recognised its need, as a strong local and national humanitarian actor, to remain a champion of the global Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's values and strategies in-country. It has continuously maintained a localised implementation of IFRC's Strategy 2020 and 2030, and related Movement resolutions, as well as the Manila Call for Action of the IFRC's Asia Pacific Conference and associated commitments adopted in November 2018 by Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies from Asia Pacific and Middle East. These include:

- recognising the importance and urgency of local community resilience and committing to enhanced measures in mobilising resources, applying technical tools and sharing experience
- introducing forecast-based financing (FbF) and community-based surveillance systems (CBS).

(i) Using and adapting existing Movement mechanisms to enhance overall cooperation and coordination in-country

ARCS made an NSD investment in strengthening its partnership development and coordination capacities, working on a number of domestic, Movement and external partnership frameworks, often with the facilitation of IFRC. These further established rules of engagement with all RCRC Movement and external actors. The latest framework of 2020 set out the commitments that the Movement partners make to each other, including commitments ARCS makes to its partners and the commitments it expects from each partner. This framework does not address safety and security arrangements, which are established in the Movement Coordination Agreement (MCA).

ARCS, IFRC and ICRC have an in-country MCA which has been implemented through regular coordination meetings at leadership level, including Tripartite Strategic Meetings to discuss and/or address critical issues pertaining to the contextual (security, political dynamics) and operational challenges as well as cooperation issues as a Red Cross Red Crescent harmonised 'red pillar' response in Afghanistan.

Key outcomes of enhanced Movement Cooperation and Coordination mechanisms have included:

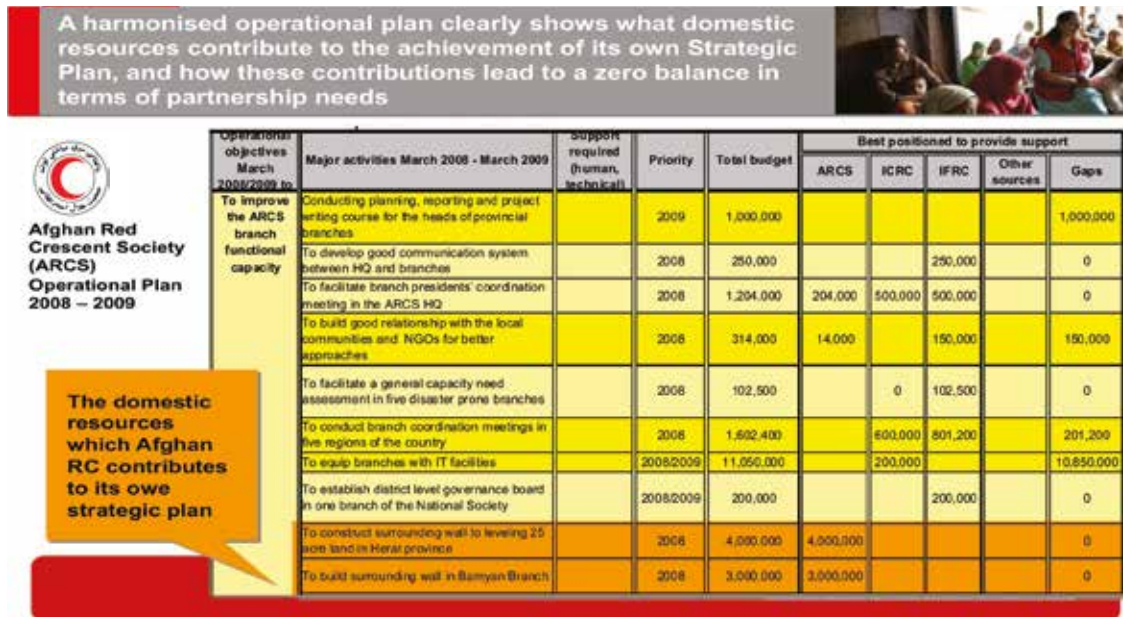
- ✓ annual Partnership Meetings as a central platform for facilitating coordinated Movement support for ARCS's overall development, with NSD for sustainable service delivery being a permanent priority topic
- ✓ coordinated planning and joint annual planning with partners
- ✓ the Unified Country Plan achieved in 2022, showing the contributions of all Movement partners in one harmonised support plan aligned to ARCS's latest Strategic Plan 2021–2025
- ✓ country-based adherence to the Strengthening Movement Cooperation and Coordination (SMCC) mechanisms are in place through:
 - o quarterly tripartite meetings to address strategic issues and strengthen cooperation arrangements in areas of common concern or mutual interest
 - o operational coordination meetings which are set up on a bi-monthly basis, or more regularly in case of emergency response, as facilitated by IFRC and under ARCS leadership
 - o technical coordination meetings on thematic areas of shared interest by partners, under the lead of ARCS senior management.
- ✓ further cooperation opportunities will be explored, possibly including joint positioning on policy issues for international events highlighting Afghan context, and coordinated collaboration on NSD and capacity enhancement activities/initiatives or joint field visits for monitoring purposes.



(ii) Harmonising Movement support for ARCS's own NSD priorities

ARCS has developed a succession of NSD plans and strategies to strengthen the coordinated support it receives from multiple partners to its own NSD priorities as set out in its Strategic Plans. These have included:

- A unique approach, in 2011, to a Harmonised Movement Support Plan, setting out the contributions that ARCS itself makes to the achievement of its own objectives in its Strategic and Operational Plans, followed by the contributions of partners to address the gaps. The following example shows the mapping of ARCS and Movement partners' commitments and gaps against 2011 Operational Plan targets related to branch development:



ARCS's latest Strategic Plan 2021–2025 and accompanying Operational Plan 2021–2023 continues this transparency, showing how much ARCS contributes to the achievement of its four Strategic Plan goals and more detailed operational plan activities. The results shown in the diagram below show that, although ARCS has committed a certain percentage of its own funds to each of the four goals, the largest amount of 53.9% of funds are committed to goal four – its own NSD and development, realising that partners prefer to fund humanitarian operations. This is confirmation of the senior leadership's commitment to ARCS's own development as a transparent, accountable and efficient organisation.

March 21st 2022 – March 20th 2023			
Goals	ARCS Contribution	Partners' Contributions	Gap
1	3.7%	88.0%	8.3%
2	23.6%	57.2%	19.2%
3	17.2%	64.6%	18.2%
4	53.9%	28.1%	18.0%
Total	12.3%	77%	10.7%

- An updated National Society Development Initiative (NSDI), to be launched in late 2023, aims to bring together all Movement components and partners under four integrated areas of NSD as follows: volunteering and branch development; financial, logistics and digitalisation; HR and Movement induction for all levels; and health infrastructure and Marastoon development. The NSDI Technical Working Groups (TWGs) have been tasked by ARCS's senior leadership to refresh existing ARCS Policies, define new standards and targets in all areas of NSD work; and monitor and report back on the results as contributions to more transparent, effective and efficient services.
- The TWGs will be initiated in early 2024.

10. Lessons learned on NSD strategies to adapt organisational relevance and capacities in a complex and fragile environment

(i) Sustainability

As a result of consistent NSD investments in its strong Legal Base, ARCS has a long history of domestic resource mobilisation from a number of sources. The updated ARCS Law of 2016 further clarified and specified a range of income-generating sources for its publicly appreciated neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian work, and reconfirmed its tax-free donation status.

However, it aims for a sustainability strategy driven not just by partnerships, but by ensuring that its financial security and independence are maximised through effective cost management and a diverse local domestic revenue generation portfolio. The results of this NSD investment workstream include:

- rental income from property and asset management
- government commitment and donations of 2% of all national customs duties and passport fees as a prescribed financial contribution in recognition of its auxiliary role and public humanitarian services delivered
- in 2014, 360 volunteers were trained in fundraising in 10 provincial branches – in one event alone these trained volunteers raised AFN 7,000,000 (equivalent to USD 134,615)
- branch level local resource mobilisation practices (production of bricks and other items for sale)
- a dependable average annual total of USD \$ 11–13 million
- annual ARCS Red Crescent Day
- ARCS's Special Week in May, which continues to raise significant funds from the Afghan people and institutions (in 2022, ARCS invested 2.5 million Afghanis and earned 25 million (CHF 360,000); in 2023 it invested 3.5 million and earned 40 million (CHF 480,000)
- in 2023, with permission from the Ministry of Telecommunications, ARCS developed an MoU with a major Afghan mobile phone company to start digital fundraising through mobile phones. As a very high percentage of Afghan people are mobile users, the income projections are large. With 20 million SIM card users, an SMS or WhatsApp message receiving even 10 Afghanis from each user could bring in 200,000,000 Afghanis (CHF 2.4 million) every time there is an appeal. Pilots will start in late 2023 or early 2024, linked to an ARCS proposal to establish a call centre to process donations.

Parallel strategic NSD investments were made to raise the profile of the Fundamental Principles, and ARCS's services, to deepen its humanitarian advocacy capacity. These included investments in stronger public communications channels (a regular newsletter, videos, Facebook page and website), which enabled it to draw donations from the Afghan public who wanted to support neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian services.

NSD activities also strengthened accountability systems (with communities, public authorities and partners) as a precondition for effective resource development. Such strategic NSD investments in domestic resource mobilisation and sustainability within conflict-sensitive contexts have given ARCS independence in its humanitarian decision-making, allowing it to support communities whom donors cannot support.

ARCS also continues to build its local sustainability plans in order to generate funds that support people other partners and donors cannot reach. Its Resource Mobilisation Department was formally established in 2017. Through peer exchanges with other National Societies in 2017–2019, an updated regulation, consulted upon with the Ministry of Justice in 2021 and further aligned to ARCS's revised law and statutes, will enable its branches and HQ to follow clearer guidelines. NSD initiatives strengthening local resource mobilisation included:



- disaster preparedness initiatives that have resulted in people at the community level mobilising their own funds during disasters. To increase community ownership and effectiveness of this programme, for longer-term sustainability, ARCS introduced training in community-based income generating activities
- developing further income generation and social entrepreneurship opportunities to sustain ARCS's services, including commercial first aid, strengthened asset and property management, and collaboration with the private sector at branch level
- enhancing internal Resource Mobilisation Policies and Procedures, capacity, and effective development of programmes, and business plans to drive resourcing and income-generation
- finalising and implementing a fully-fledged resource mobilisation strategy, drawing on proper market and donor data analysis, data fundraising opportunities, better links with communication, and establishment and monitoring of annual fundraising targets
- undertaking an updated inventory of ARCS resources, capacities and assets with greater focus on branches
- identifying external resources and embedding HR capacities in ARCS for effective business planning and development.

ARCS has consistently aimed at expanding these partnerships to meet ever-increasing humanitarian needs and diversify our domestic sources of income to achieve greater organisational self-sufficiency.

It hopes that its use of emerging technologies will lead to expanded partnerships with media, as well as with the 70% of the Afghan population who have access to mobile phones. This will strengthen its dissemination of humanitarian values, digital outreach, and communications with all stakeholders across Afghan society, strengthening public and institutional understanding of its neutral, impartial and independent positioning at the same time.

(ii) Contributors to the success of transformative processes

"Transformation processes take between 10 and 15 years and are based on a stable succession of principled leaders."

Partner National Society

ARCS's prioritised NSD strategies and investments have resulted in a number of strengths in responding to people affected by different forms of conflict and violence, and in enhancing their resilience. These have helped distinguish ARCS from other civil society and non-Governmental organisations and include:

- having a strong and regularly updated legal base that confirms its neutral, impartial and independent auxiliary status and services
- having strong and principled senior leadership that undertook humanitarian diplomacy to safeguard and refresh appropriate evolving auxiliary roles with public authorities at all levels
- remaining positioned as completely neutral and free of political considerations
- being acceptable to communities and active in their access to emergencies all over the country
- being first responders with Fundamental Principles and values that all local communities and external stakeholders can trust
- positioning itself as a promoter of social inclusion, community cohesion and peace
- mobilising consistent and significant domestic income for neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian services
- having long-term support from partners to enhance the role of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian and developmental services across the country and in all territories held by conflicting groups.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



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