“Working with people no one else can reach” is the ethos underpinning the work of the Afghan Red Crescent Society (ARCS). Active since 1934, the ARCS has earned a unique position among humanitarian organizations in the divided country, with widespread acceptance and access on all sides. The Red Crescent law of 2016 has strengthened its status as independent, neutral, auxiliary to the government without weakening its links to all sides of the community. But ongoing funding remains essential, with poverty increasing amid slow economic growth, while the impact of natural and man-made disasters is exacerbated by climate change and compounded by governance challenges.

Afghanistan’s economic recovery has been slowed by security and other factors. Continued insecurity, including disruptions to services, hampers both private investment and consumer demand. Agricultural growth is constrained by unfavourable weather conditions. And the government remains heavily reliant on donor grants. The security situation has worsened in 2018, with civilian casualties at their highest since 2002. The unprecedented level of conflict-induced displacements has been surpassed by recent drought-induced displacements. Together with a surge in returnees from Iran and Pakistan, these are putting mounting pressure on humanitarian assistance. Poverty and governance challenges undermine
efforts towards the Sustainable Development Goals. Around 36 per cent of the country’s 32.5 million population live in poverty and adult literacy rate is 38 per cent. The country ranks 177th in Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index and 169th in the Human Development Index (where the best-performing countries are ranked in the lower numbers), as well as 9th in the Fragile States Index (where the best-performing countries are ranked in the higher numbers).

Afghanistan is prone to several natural hazards, due to its rugged mountain landscape and generally arid climate. Floods, droughts, landslides, earthquakes and avalanches are common. There are three dimensions to its disaster vulnerability: lack of coping capacity, hazards and exposure, and the risk of human crises and disasters.

The ARCS is in a strong position to bring assistance services to those in the most need. It is neutral, impartial and independent, as per the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This enables its auxiliary role to the public authorities, in a distinctive partnership based on international laws and the national 2016 Red Crescent law. It also has the systems, processes and know-how to safeguard staff and volunteers during operations in the field. At this stage, the Movement components working with ARCS are: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), and, Partner National Societies (PNS) including British Red Cross, Canadian Red Cross, Chinese Red Cross, Danish Red Cross, Finnish Red Cross, Iranian Red Crescent, Japanese Red Cross, Norwegian Red Cross, Qatari Red Crescent, Saudi Red Crescent, Swedish Red Cross, and, Turkish Red Crescent.

ARCS is a national organization with the widest presence and access to vulnerable populations, especially marginalized people, covering over 90 per cent of the territory. This acceleration plan summarizes the main points of the ARCS Strategic Plan 2016–20. It is divided by areas of focus, but on the ground, the ARCS works with a holistic, community-based approach. Any given operation usually cuts across several areas of focus, to better address the multi-dimension needs of the beneficiaries and maximise the effectiveness of resources. In this way, investment in a particular area of focus often has knock-on benefits in other areas.
**AREAS OF FOCUS**

**AREA OF FOCUS**

**DISASTER RISK REDUCTION (DRR)**

- **8,500** people will be made more resilient against disasters.

**AREA OF FOCUS**

**LIVELIHOODS AND BASIC NEEDS**

- **3,500** people will receive support to reestablish their financial independence.

**AREA OF FOCUS**

**HEALTH**

- **3.7 MILLION** people will benefit from health services including psychosocial support.

**AREA OF FOCUS**

**WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE (WASH)**

- **4,000** people will have access to clean water, sanitation and hygiene promotion.

**AREA OF FOCUS**

**PROTECTION, GENDER AND INCLUSION**

- **10,500** people will benefit from gender-sensitive and inclusive programme and services.

**AREA OF FOCUS**

**MIGRATION**

- **15,400** people will be supported in the context of migration and displacement.
STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- STRENGTHEN NATIONAL SOCIETY CAPACITIES
- ENSURE EFFECTIVE INTERNATIONAL DISASTER MANAGEMENT
- INFLUENCE OTHERS AS LEADING STRATEGIC PARTNERS
- ENSURE A STRONG IFRC
AREA OF FOCUS

DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Afghanistan is exposed to some of the highest risk levels of any country in the world, ranked fourth in the INFORM Global Risk Index for 2018. The population faces man-made and natural threats and is considered highly vulnerable in all three dimensions of hazard and exposure, vulnerability, and lack of coping capacity exacerbated by impact of climate change.

The overall objective of the ARCS operational plan is to strengthen community resilience in line with the standard IFRC definition: “The ability of individuals, communities, organizations, or countries exposed to disasters and crises and underlying vulnerabilities to: anticipate, reduce the impact of, cope with, and recover from the effects of adversity without compromising their long-term prospects.”

Building community resilience is an integrated process and involves multiple sectors and actors. It cannot be achieved by governments, organizations or individuals in isolation. Risk-informed decisions based on a holistic approach are more likely to reduce underlying vulnerabilities and ultimately lead to more resilient communities. The ARCS will implement such an integrated, holistic approach in its three-year community-level risk reduction programme to start in 2019.

A disaster risk reduction working group has been established under the Afghan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA). The programme will support local coalitions of people and organizations interested in helping vulnerable communities. The ARCS and IFRC country office were pioneer members of the group, and this work will be integrated into the IFRC’s “One Billion Coalition for Resilience” project for international cooperation on resilience and risk reduction.
The ARCS has also contributed to national-level risk management documents, namely the ANDMA Strategic Framework 2018–2028 and the Road Map for Implementation of Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030.

The ARCS is planning initiatives, with IFRC support, in the following key areas:

1. Support vulnerable communities to strengthen preparedness and ensure timely and active disaster responses
2. Strengthen the ARCS’s own capacity to support community-based risk reduction, preparedness and response
3. Raise awareness and educate the public on climate change risks and environmentally responsible practices

COMMUNITY ACTION PLANS IN PLACE 5

PEOPLE TO BE REACHED 8,500
Decades of conflict and frequent natural disasters have had significant negative impacts on the livelihoods of the Afghan people and their ability to meet their basic needs. Many have been driven from their homes to other parts of the country or abroad and are now starting to return in an influx that is increasing the strain on home communities. In addition, approximately 3 million people are addicted to narcotics, with the associated societal challenges.

ARCS operates Afghanistan’s marastoons, centres that traditionally provide shelter for the destitute. The marastoons, meaning “places of assistance” in Pashto, were first run as a public institution with support from benefactors, until the programme was integrated into the ARCS structure in 1964. The ARCS Marastoon Programme plays a key role in meeting the essential needs of the most vulnerable. However, its resources are very limited in relation to the needs of the community.

ARCS currently runs five marastoons across the country, caring for approximately 1,050 families (7350 people). The people admitted are very poor and destitute, affected by conflict or natural disasters. They include widow-headed families, physically challenged individuals, and people with special needs, including mental disabilities. The programme provides them with eight months of shelter, food, vocational training and education for their children, as well as medication where needed. Beneficiaries are also taught life skills such as hygiene, cooking, washing and literacy. They are then re-integrated into their communities with skills that can help them to work and stand on their own two feet. Psycho-social support is also provided to help cope with the conflict and the loss of loved ones.

Key areas of intervention supporting 425 out of 1,050 families (2975 people out of 7350 people) under the marastoon programme by the end of 2019 are:

1. Five tailoring and embroidery vocational trainings for 100 widow-headed families across the five marastoons
2. Skill development on resource mobilization and management for 25 marastoon staff
3. Five trainings on psychosocial services for 25 marastoon staff dealing with people with disabilities
4. One management training for 25 marastoon staff, covering planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting
5. Five trainings to 100 youth volunteers to provide social welfare support to 300 marastoon beneficiaries

People to benefit across five marastoons: 3,500
**AREA OF FOCUS**

**HEALTH**

Afghanistan has an acute need for improved health services across the board. Approximately 9 million people have limited or no access to essential healthcare services owing to insufficient coverage and the direct impact of conflict. The need for trauma care and mass-casualty management is growing. Maternal mortality and infant mortality rates are among the highest in the world. Surveys show global acute malnutrition prevalence (GAM) above 15 per cent, which is the WHO threshold that defines a critical emergency, in nine of the country’s 34 provinces.

The ARCS supports health services through 45 clinics, 48 mobile clinics and community-based health promotion in all 34 provinces. Improving the infrastructure and staff skills of the healthcare sector are also part of the Citizen’s Charter, which the ARCS is well placed to help with as an official auxiliary to the government.

In 2019, the ARCS aim to continue delivering key health services across the country through the following components of the Health and Care programme: basic health centres (BHC); community-based health and first aid (CBHFA); mobile health teams (MHT); water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); youth and HIV-AIDS; and voluntary non-remunerated blood donation.
The Global Polio Eradication Initiative is focusing on vaccinating every last child in Afghanistan, one of just three countries worldwide where the disease remains endemic. ARCS is instrumental in vaccinating children that no else can reach.

The ARCS will scale up its screening and treatment of non-communicable diseases, which account for more than 35 per cent of mortality, in partnership with the World Health Organization.

In 2019 there will be a reassessment of the ARCS health strategy and operations. This will include the development of a financial sustainability review and of future steps. Current tools for reporting and evaluation will also be assessed.

The IFRC will support the ARCS contribution towards improved health and reduced mortality through the following three strategic objectives:

1. Support the ARCS in its delivery of effective and appropriate, context-driven community-based interventions across the continuum of care

2. Promote accountability for resources and results

3. Advocate for an equity and gender-based approach
Unsafe drinking water and hygiene practices are widespread in Afghanistan. Just 55 per cent of the population has access to safe drinking water (78 per cent in urban settings and 47 per cent in rural settings), and only 39 per cent practice safe hygiene behaviours such as washing their hands with soap (66 per cent urban and 33 per cent rural) according to a joint report by UNICEF and the WHO. Even among basic health facilities, around 25 per cent are lacking basic services for water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

The incidence of water-borne diseases such as diarrhoea is very high, especially among children, according to several sources including ARCS clinics. This is also associated with chronic malnutrition among children.

WASH intersects with many other areas of focus. Inadequate shelter increases exposure to poor sanitation in urban fringes and informal settlements. Migration can put additional strain on WASH facilities in these settlements, especially where displaced people are returning in large numbers. And disasters, whether man-made or natural, make it harder to adhere to key protective measures from water-borne diseases, such as using latrines and washing hands with soap.

The ARCS is planning to provide comprehensive WASH packages, with IFRC support, to families living in informal and formal settlements. Some families in rented accommodation may need only the hygiene component of WASH, through kits and awareness messages. Others living in their own shelters alongside host communities may need both water and hygiene support. Durable sanitation solutions such as wells and latrines also need to be applied in such settings.

A WASH programme has been implemented in northern Afghanistan since 2008 by the ARCS, with IFRC support. The programme in Balkh seeks to improve access to safer water and sanitation, promote hygiene practices, improve health awareness and first aid services and food security at community level for 50,000 households by the end of 2020.

The IFRC is supporting WASH in Afghanistan through three strategic objectives:

1. Support national societies in the delivery of effective and appropriate, context-driven interventions across the continuum of resilience
2. Promote accountability for resources and results
3. Advocate for an equity-based approach and gender
AREA OF FOCUS

PROTECTION, GENDER AND INCLUSION

Protection, Gender and Inclusion (PGI) is IFRC’s cross-cutting approach to ensure the dignity, access, participation and safety of all individuals across all activities and programming. It is based on a thorough and ongoing analysis of how people’s gender, disability, age and other diversity factors affect their vulnerability to harm before, during and after a disaster.

Building on the work done in gender and diversity mainstreaming in 2018, the common thread of all the work planned in 2019 and 2020 is a focus on engaging with those people who face risks of marginalization, inequality and violence. This is done through addressing issues of exclusion, discrimination and inequity, including the following elements:

1. Greater emphasis on stand-alone protection areas including anti-trafficking assessments, piloting projects to protect adolescent girls on the move from sexual gender-based violence, and upholding sexual and reproductive health rights and services during emergencies. In complex humanitarian settings, IFRC is aiming to increase local capacities to implement community-based protection assessments to identify context-specific protection concerns, risks and needs of girls, boys, women and men, and analyse the intersection of these with other diversity conditions.

2. Inclusive and protective disaster response operations based on a gender and diversity analysis. IFRC’s revised Minimum Standard Commitments to Protection, Gender and Inclusion in Emergency Programming which includes establishing and strengthening referral pathways and ensuring access to multi-sector response services. The revised Commitments will be disseminated and integrated into trainings for surge capacity as well as PGI integration in emergencies.
3. Encouraging local, evidence-based solutions using research and best practice approaches to advance gender equality and inclusion within the protection framework. Inclusion of people with disabilities as well as sexual and gender minorities in all aspects of our programmes remains a priority and an imperative for the region.

4. Improvements in the collection and analysis of data disaggregated by sex, age and disability, through existing data collection mechanisms, enabling research and new learning content and tools needed for staff and volunteers to specifically address inclusion of people with disabilities and gender and sexual minorities in the different settings where we are operating.

Afghanistan’s gender equality is ranked 168th out of 189 countries, according to the Human Development Index. Just 19.5 per cent of women aged 15 and over participate in the workforce, compared with 86.7 per cent of men. Around 57 per cent of marriages in 2004 involved girls younger than 16, the legal minimum. Many women and girls are excluded from education, healthcare and emergency services, increasing their vulnerability.

The ARCS is working to improve gender equity within its own ranks. Article 18 of its 2008 Constitution states that membership is open to all, without any discrimination “based on race, gender, social or economic status, language, religion or political opinion”. The ARCS set up a gender team in 2014 to support activities targeting the needs of all members. In 2018 the ARCS Gender and Diversity strategy was finalized, incorporating the principle of protection, gender and inclusion (PGI) into all ARCS work, along with other subsequent documents. However, the number of women in leadership positions remains marginal. In response, the ARCS Strategy 2020 aims to increase the number of female staff from 15 per cent to 25 per cent.

At a programme level, the ARCS will roll out PGI initiatives through its department for disaster management and health. In 2019–2020, the focus will be on practical work within the department to ensure PGI and regular monitoring. The department will develop awareness of gender issues and gender-based challenges among staff, volunteers and beneficiaries, to promote equality among targeted communities as well as within the organization.
AREA OF FOCUS

MIGRATION

The Afghan refugee situation is one of the world’s most protracted and has been running since 1979. From 2001 to 2018 around 7.1 million Afghans have returned home from abroad or within the country, according to the Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation. On return they often lack access to education and health services, adequate housing, land, or employment opportunities. The severe winter conditions in many areas further strain the already fragile coping mechanisms.

ARCS is scaling up its work in 2019–2020 on assisting displaced people, including those returning home, in line with its mission to work with those most in need and those no one else can reach. ARCS has strategically chosen to scale up existing services focused in the eastern provinces bordering Pakistan, namely Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar.

Interventions support community resilience as well as the needs of those returning, by providing essential health services and psycho-social support. This will be done using a multi-pronged approach including the ARCS clinics and mobile health teams as well as promotions in schools, support for greater social inclusion, and provision of cash assistance to 2,000 returnees in the east, west and north-west regions of Afghanistan.

This area of focus will build on ARCS resources, namely its strong health-service experience, its disaster response capability, and its 29,000-strong volunteer cadre. This will also complement the ongoing humanitarian assistance efforts for returnees by the government and other humanitarian actors. To ensure effective partnerships with communities, communication and engagement in all its forms will be prioritized.

In 2019 to achieve the outcome and objectives of this project, ARCS will undertake the following:

1. Provide assistance and protection services to migrants and their families in east and west regions of Afghanistan (emergency health, psycho-social support, restoring family links and cash assistance)

2. Develop ARCS Migration / Returnees Policy and Advocacy plan

3. Establish cross-border Red Cross and Red Crescent Partners Platform on migration / Returnees especially with Afghan, Iran and Pakistan RCs

4. Continue working with stakeholders like UNHCR, IOM and Ministry of Repatriation and Rehabilitation (MORR) for joint programming

PEOPLE TO BE REACHED WITH SERVICES FOR MIGRATION ASSISTANCE AND PROTECTION

15,400
STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

STRENGTHEN NATIONAL SOCIETY CAPACITIES

As per its five-year strategic plan for 2016–2020, organizational development remains a high priority for the ARCS leadership and management, with the following focus areas.

1. Leadership and legal base development to further strengthen the governance board of the ARCS in both headquarters and branches. The ARCS statutes will be reviewed and revised, with the revisions to be approved by the ARCS second general assembly. Stronger efforts will be made to enhance leadership investment initiatives at various levels of the Afghan Red Crescent Society and legal base.
2. **Youth and volunteer development:**

- Youth representatives on the ARCS governance board
- Attendance at youth clubs to reach the tens of thousands
- At least 50 per cent of the youth club attendees to be female
- IFRC to help identify strategic goals and outcomes through increased youth empowerment and engagement
- Volunteer engagement to be diversified by using the standards of the Community of Volunteers framework

3. **Finance and financial sustainability development through decentralization and improved workflow of finance operations:**

- Improved timeliness of financial transfers to branches and regional offices
- Sharing of financial reports with the branches’ governance board, and through them with communities
- Financial authority delegated to regional and branch offices, assisting decentralization and smooth decision-making
- A department for income and resource mobilization established, to work towards ARCS self-sufficiency

4. **Development of the internal audit** in response to the persistent challenge of corruption in Afghanistan, which is ranked 177th out of 180 by the Corruption Perception Index (where the highest number is the most corrupt). An assessment of the current internal audit practices was conducted and shared with the ARCS leadership and management. An action plan will be developed based on that report’s recommendations, to help the ARCS improve its accountability and transparency.

5. **Development of human resources to address the high numbers and low capacity of paid staff.** ARCS is overstaffed in most programmes and support services, with paid staff currently numbering more than 2,000. Additionally, the professional capacity and quality of the staff is low. An assessment is to be conducted, and a report written. Based on these, a road map and plan are to be developed to assist the ARCS in restructuring, with IFRC support.

6. **Development of planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER)** via a newly established unit, and of a PMER five-year strategic plan.

7. **Branch development:** A Branch Organization Capacity Assessment (BOCA) was conducted in 2015 and reviewed in 2018. A branch development framework is now established, and governance boards are established in all 34 branches. In 2019 more branch capacity-building is required, since all ARCS humanitarian service delivery is conducted by the branches in the field. Branch rating and recognition will also be supported technically. Follow-up and monitoring of activities will also be supported through field trips. IFRC will follow and support improvement of local capacities of the ARCS branches network prioritizing human, financial and technological resources and systems.
Under the national 2016 Red Crescent Law, the ARCS has an auxiliary role to the government in providing services in times of disasters or emergencies. The ARCS is closely involved with the Afghan National Disaster Management Authority (ANDMA) at all levels, and has a clear role under the ANDMA's 2010 National Disaster Management Plan 2010 as follows:

1. Participate in damage assessment and identify vulnerable areas, collect data and identify needs
2. Provide emergency assistance to disaster-affected people including first aid, food and clothing
3. Help affected people through rescue and evacuation work, temporary shelter through local shuras, and volunteers
4. Request international assistance through the IFRC where necessary
5. Train volunteers and send them to potential disaster-affected areas

Efforts to improve the ARCS’s preparedness for effective response (PER) capacity started in 2016 and will continue in 2019–2020. The need was identified during the 2016 Disaster Response Capacity Evaluation, and is an objective in the ARCS strategy for 2016–2020. The ARCS has been supported by the IFRC, the Canadian Red Cross and other Movement partners, in its efforts to build PER capacity.

In 2019–2020, efforts will continue to focus on strengthening ARCS response tools, systems and policies in line with Red Cross Red Crescent guiding principles. Projects to improve PER include the following objectives for disaster response teams (DRTs) and units (DRUs), which are also laid out in the ARCS Disaster Management Strategy for 2016–2020:

1. 50 national DRTs at HQ Level
2. 175 regional-level DRUs at regional level (25 in each region: Northern, Western, Southern, Central, Southeastern, Eastern and Northeastern)
3. 850 branch-level DRTs at branch level (25 at each branch)

ARCS is set to achieve around 40 per cent of the above targets by the end of 2018 and aims for completion by the end of 2020. The above steps will include strengthening and diversification of ARCS disaster-response tools at national, regional and branch levels, as well as prepositioning of equipment for disaster response teams at HQ, region and branch level. It also covers the usage of standard disaster-response tools for emergency response, and training on reporting in emergencies.
STRATEGY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

INFLUENCE OTHERS AS LEADING STRATEGIC PARTNERS

The ARCS aims to become a sustainable, agile and resilient National Society that does more and better, and reaches further. Several elements are essential to this, including: securing greater access to vulnerable people and influencing them to be decision makers; maintaining a deeper and more meaningful dialogue with government authorities, the private sector and the UN agencies; bringing the voice of vulnerable people to policy and planning forums; and collaborating closely with other partners within the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement.

An effective communications presence has already been established, among others by the successful launch of the IFRC 2016 World Disasters Report. The worldwide One Billion Coalition (1BC) for Resilience campaign was launched in Afghanistan at the same time as the 2018 Word Disasters Report, another key component of influencing agencies, media and academia to support the building of community resilience in the country.

ARCS is particularly well placed as an influencer, due to its status in the 2016 Red Crescent Law, and its positioning as the most accepted and widely present humanitarian agency in Afghanistan.

IFRC continues actively participating in the discussions of the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) and of clusters and their working groups in all sectors, as well as in the discussions at other NGO coordination platforms including the International NGO Safety Organisation.
STRAIGHT FOR IMPLEMENTATION

ENSURE A STRONG IFRC

IFRC reinforces its institutional commitment to:

1. **Compliance with highest standards of accountability** to all relevant stakeholders through a wide-scoped framework and tools that include code of conduct, principle and rules for humanitarian assistance, audited reports of expenditures and wide-ranging monitoring and evaluation methodologies.

2. **Amenability to key management performance indicators**, and adoption of a results-based approach for all work outlined in long-term plans and emergency operations. All activities via IFRC are monitored through a detailed measurement system with indicators at different levels.

3. **Full adherence to IFRC’s Fraud and Corruption Prevention and Control policy** and facilitation of effective risk management, as well as the development of a culture of transparency as part of a robust framework that contributes to sound management practices.

4. **Strict concession to IFRC’s Prevention and Response of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse policy** that ensures every necessary step is taken to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by IFRC personnel, and adequately response to those incidents it cannot prevent. The policy prioritizes the well-being of the survivor and the accountability and integrity of IFRC’s engagement with members of local communities.

5. **Highest commitment to ensuring a safe working environment** and effective human resource management towards greater diversity and gender equality.
Contact information of the IFRC Country office, for partners who wish to find out more:

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