
AREF
Africa Research
Excellence Fund
Theory of Change

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The Challenge

Across Africa, early-career researchers are working in environments that do not consistently enable them to reach their full potential. While many possess strong technical foundations and deep contextual understanding of local health challenges, they often face structural barriers that limit their progression into independent research leadership.

Access to competitive funding remains constrained, mentorship opportunities are uneven, and institutional systems do not always provide the support, incentives, or protected time required for research. In addition, limited domestic investment in research, including inadequate funding from many African governments, private sector, and philanthropic actors, continues to restrict opportunities for sustainable researcher development and locally led scientific innovation.

At the same time, limited access to global research networks and leadership opportunities continue to limit the visibility and influence of African researchers. These challenges are compounded by underdeveloped research ecosystems, including inadequate laboratory and research infrastructure, and institutional systems that often provide insufficient protected time, mentorship, and career development opportunities for researchers. They also limit researchers' capacity to produce world-leading research and translate evidence into innovation, policy and practice, and improved health outcomes across the continent and globally.

As a result, despite carrying a disproportionate share of the global disease burden, Africa remains underrepresented in global research leadership and output. Addressing this imbalance requires much more than isolated interventions. It requires a coordinated approach that strengthens not only individual researchers, but also the institutions and systems in which they operate.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Early career African researchers face structural barriers in accessing specialist research capabilities, transferable skills, networks, mentorship and institutional support, limiting their ability to secure competitive funding, progress into leadership and contribute to an equitable and high-impact research ecosystem.

Our **Response**

Barrier		Response
Limited access to opportunities, support systems, and enabling conditions for diverse early-career researchers (particularly women and those with caregiving responsibilities) to fully participate and progress in research careers.	**Individual** 01	Provide holistic support to ECRs through capacity development, mentorship, leadership training, and access to funding and research opportunities. Ensure inclusive participation by promoting equitable access for women and underrepresented groups, and by adopting flexible approaches that accommodate diverse needs.
Weak institutional research environments, including limited incentives, inadequate support structures, and competing demands, constrain early-career researchers' ability to prioritise research and progress professionally.	**Institutional** 02	Strengthen institutional research environments by supporting the development of policies, incentives, and systems that enable ECRs to prioritize research, access mentorship, and progress in their careers. Engage institutions to foster supportive research cultures and align structures with ECR development and research excellence.
Limited access to equitable research collaborations, professional networks, and knowledge-sharing platforms across Africa constrains opportunities for researchers to build partnerships, exchange expertise, mobilise resources, and collectively influence research, policy, and practice.	**Ecosystem** 03	Build and sustain a diverse community of research leaders through capacity- building, alumni networking, and strategic partnerships. Facilitate equitable collaborations, knowledge exchange, peer learning, and opportunities that enable researchers across Africa to share expertise, access resources, influence research agendas, and collectively strengthen African research leadership.
Limited availability of funding, research opportunities, and sustainable financing ecosystems restricts the ability of early-career researchers to generate evidence, secure grants, and contribute to innovation and development.	**Knowledge Economy** 04	Strengthen ECR capacity to secure and manage research funding while supporting access to research opportunities. Contribute to the development of a more sustainable and diversified funding ecosystem that enables translation of research into innovation, enterprise, and socio-economic impact.

AREF's Approach

AREF's Theory of Change is built on the understanding that **sustainable research impact depends on strengthening the entire pathway from individual capability to institutional and ecosystem transformation.** Rather than focusing solely on technical training, AREF delivers a portfolio of programmes that collectively support researchers at different stages of their development, as well as supporting African research institutions to build internal researcher development capacity and fostering an intra-continental community of AREF alumni to strengthen networks and collaborations. These programmes are designed to enhance not only research skills, but also leadership, collaboration, and the ability to navigate complex research environments.

Through AREF's core programmes, ranging from its **Grant Writing Programme** and **Research Development Fellowship** to its **Towards Leadership Programme** and **Excell Programme** (institutional strengthening), AREF enables researchers to access opportunities, develop their expertise, and build the networks necessary to thrive. The **Equitable Partnerships Programme** complements these efforts by promoting equitable and mutually beneficial research partnerships that strengthen institutional collaboration, foster inclusive research cultures, and contribute to more sustainable and resilient African research systems. At the same time, AREF works with institutions to strengthen research culture, systems, and incentives, ensuring that individual gains are sustained and amplified.

AREF supports institutional change through both direct and indirect pathways. Directly, AREF works with research institutions, institutional leaders, mentors, and partners to strengthen researcher development practices, mentorship systems, leadership capacity, and supportive research environments. Indirectly, AREF supports researchers to act as catalysts for change within their organisations by applying new skills, introducing good practices, strengthening mentoring approaches, and contributing to improvements in research culture and systems. Together, these pathways help ensure that individual researcher development contributes to broader and more sustainable institutional strengthening.

AREF recognises that sustainable research systems also depend on broader structural factors, including domestic investment in research, national science policies and institutional financing. While these are beyond AREF's direct control, our programmes contribute by strengthening research leadership, institutional capacity, partnerships and evidence that support longer-term system development.

Through the AREF Alumni Network, these connections extend beyond programme participation, fostering collaboration, mentorship, and collective leadership that strengthens African research capacity and supports the emergence of a vibrant community of research leaders in Africa and for Africa.

Core AREF **Programmes**

Research Development Fellowship

Grant Writing Programme

Towards Leadership Programme

Excell Programme



THEORY OF CHANGE

The Challenge

Early-career researchers (ECRs) in Africa face:

- Limited access to funding
- Weak mentorship and leadership opportunities
- Unsupportive institutional environments
- Limited collaboration and research networks
- Underdeveloped research ecosystems

AREF's Response

Develop Researchers

- Advanced technical training
- Grant writing workshops
- Leadership development
- Fellowships & mentoring

Strengthen Institutions

- Research culture
- Mentorship systems
- Researcher development capacity
- Supportive policies and practices

Enhance Research Ecosystems

- Alumni Network
- Peer learning
- Collaboration
- Strategic partnerships

AREF ALUMNI NETWORK

Research Funding & Grants

Researchers secure competitive funding and lead larger research grants.

Impact

African researchers lead competitive, collaborative, and equitable research from Africa, shaping research agendas and driving sustainable improvements in health and development outcomes.

Career Advancement & Leadership

Researchers progress into influential leadership roles within their institutions and fields.

Research Output & Publications

Researchers produce high-quality research and influence evidence-informed decision-making.

Research Culture & Environment

Institutionsstrengthenresearch cultures that support researcher development and excellence.

Innovation & Socio-Economic Impact

Researcherstranslate research into innovation, policy, practice, and socio-economic development.

Key Assumptions

- ✓ Researchers remain engaged and apply learning.
- ✓ Institutions support researcher development and research excellence.
- ✓ Funding, partnerships, and collaboration opportunities remain available.
- ✓ The wider environment enables research, innovation, and impact.

How Change Happens

At the heart of AREF's approach is a clear causal logic that links its interventions to long-term impact.

01

If early-career researchers are provided with integrated support to develop technical and leadership skills, to access high-quality mentorship, to write compelling grant proposals and pursue relevant funding opportunities, and grow networks that enable ongoing collaboration and peer support,

02

and if research institutions are engaged to strengthen policies, systems, mentorship structures, and incentives that enable researchers to prioritise research, progress in their careers, and contribute to a culture of research excellence,

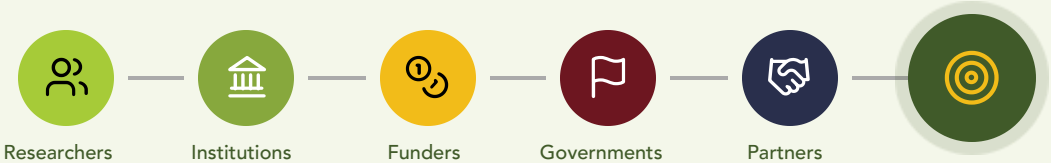
03

then researchers will develop the skills, confidence, and professional networks needed to apply their learning effectively in practice, while institutions become better equipped to support and sustain researcher development.

As these capabilities and structures are applied, researchers begin to **shift how they work**, developing clearer research agendas and prioritising them, identifying and pursuing appropriate funding opportunities, successfully securing competitive research funding, and building meaningful collaborations, supported by sustained engagement within the AREF Alumni Network and more enabling institutional environments. At the same time, institutions strengthen mentorship practices, researcher support systems, and organisational approaches that promote research excellence and career progression.

Together with the efforts of researchers, institutions, funders, governments and partners, these changes contribute to stronger research systems and greater influence of African researchers in shaping global health research agendas.

Over time, these changes become sustained and systemic. Researchers advance into senior leadership positions, institutions embed supportive research cultures and development pathways, and research outputs increase in both quality and impact.

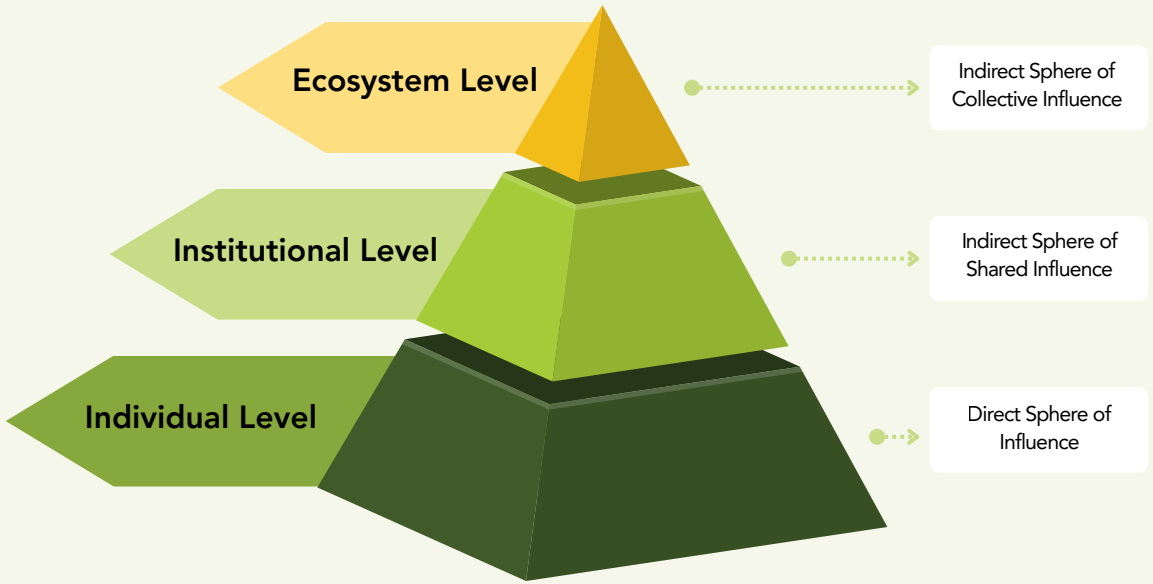


Ultimately, this results in stronger research systems, increased innovation, enterprise and greater influence of African researchers and institutions in shaping African and global health research priorities, policy and sustainable development solutions.



Pathways to **Impact**

AREF's programmes create a reinforcing pathway of change that extends beyond individual researchers:



At the **individual level**, participants build the skills, confidence, and networks required to succeed **(sphere of direct influence)**

At the **institutional level**, these gains are translated into improved research culture, mentorship, and support systems **(sphere of indirect shared influence)**

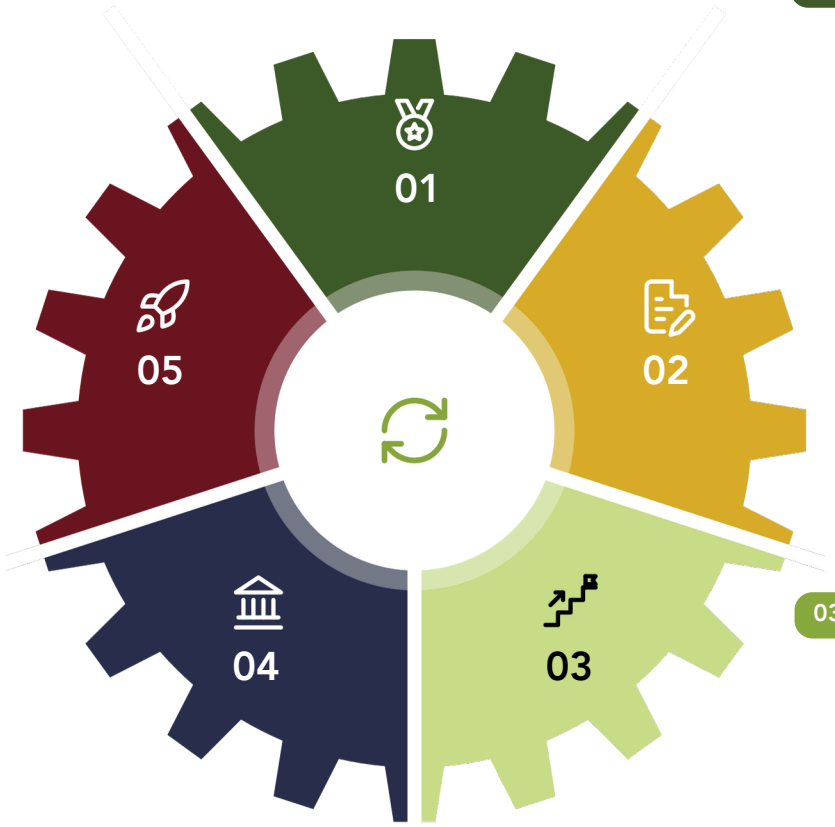
At the **ecosystem level**, increased collaboration and leadership contribute to a more connected and influential African research community **(sphere of indirect collective influence)**

Through this process, AREF contributes to a gradual but meaningful shift, where African researchers are not only participating in global research, but increasingly **leading it**, defining priorities, and ensuring that research is grounded in local realities and needs.



Domains of **Change**

AREF's Theory of Change is structured around five interlinked domains that capture the progression from research capacity development to sustained leadership, institutional strengthening, innovation and socio- economic impact. Each domain reflects a critical dimension of change, with specific sub-domains representing the mechanisms through which transformation occurs.



01 Research Funding & Grants

- Improved capacity to design andsubmitcompetitive proposals
- Increased success in securing research grants
- Enhanced ability to secure and lead large, competitive research grants
- Increased intra-network and collaborative grants

02 Research Output & Publications

- Increased production of research outputs and publications
- Improved quality of research outputs and increased leadership in authorship
- Enhanced contribution to scientific knowledge and recognition through influential research outputs
- Increased co-authored research outputs

03 Career Advancement & Leadership

- Increased independence indesigning, leading, andmanaging research
- Increased engagement in formal and informal research leadership roles
- Advancement into senior academic, institutional, or research leadership positions
- Recognition as subject-matter experts and influential research leaders

04 Research Culture & Environment

- Improvedinstitutionalenvironments that support high-quality research and researcher development
- Strengthened mentorship systems and leadership support for early-career researchers
- Embedding of practices, systems, and norms that sustain research excellence and continuous development
- Strengthened research collaboration across Africa through alumni engagement

05 Innovation & Socio-Economic Impact

- Increasedtranslationofresearch into innovations, technologies, and applied solutions
- Enhanced mechanisms for technology transfer, uptake, and commercialisation of research outputs
- Increased economic and societal benefits generated from research-driven innovations
- Strengthened cross-institutional innovation partnerships

Across all domains, the AREF Alumni Network acts as a strategic enabler of change and cross-cutting platform by facilitating collaboration, mentorship, peer learning, knowledge exchange, and equitable partnerships. Through sustained engagement beyond individual programmes, the network helps amplify and sustain outcomes at individual, institutional, and ecosystem levels.

1. Research Funding & Grants

This domain focuses on strengthening researchers' capacity and competitiveness to secure research funding, recognising that access to funding is a key gateway to research independence and leadership. Through targeted support in grant writing, navigating different funding bodies, early funding success, and large-scale funding competitiveness, researchers develop the ability to design and submit high-quality proposals, build a track record of securing grants, and progressively compete for and lead major research awards. The AREF Alumni Network further supports this progression by facilitating peer learning, mentorship, knowledge sharing, and access to collaborative funding opportunities.

At the institutional level, increased grant success strengthens research capacity by attracting financial resources, supporting infrastructure development, expanding research programmes, and creating opportunities for mentorship and researcher development. At the ecosystem level, alumni collaborations and participation in regional and international funding consortia enhance Africa's visibility and influence within global research funding landscapes.

This domain reflects a progression from initial proposal development to sustained funding success and leadership in large-scale research programmes, positioning researchers as competitive actors within global funding landscapes.





2. Research Output & Publications

This domain captures the generation and influence of research through high-quality outputs that contribute to scientific knowledge and evidence- informed decision-making.

By strengthening research production, authorship leadership, and scientific contribution, researchers increase both the volume and quality of their outputs while taking on more prominent roles in authorship and dissemination. Through the AREF Alumni Network, researchers gain opportunities for collaboration, co-authorship, peer review, and dissemination of findings across countries and disciplines.

At the institutional level, increased research outputs contribute to institutional reputation, research visibility, and academic competitiveness. At the ecosystem level, collaborative publications and knowledge-sharing through the alumni network strengthen Africa's contribution to global scientific discourse and evidence-informed policy and practice.

The domain reflects a shift from producing research outputs to shaping knowledge and influencing scientific discourse, with growing recognition through high-impact publications and contributions to seminal research.

3. Career Advancement & Leadership

This domain focuses on the progression of researchers into independent, influential leadership roles within academia, research systems, and innovation ecosystems.

Through strengthening research independence, leadership roles, career progression, and recognition, researchers move from contributing to research to leading it — designing, managing, and directing research programmes and teams. The AREF Alumni Network provides ongoing opportunities for peer support, mentoring, visibility, and leadership development that extend beyond individual programme participation.

At the institutional level, the emergence of skilled research leaders strengthens mentorship, succession planning, research management, and organisational capacity. At the ecosystem level, alumni increasingly contribute to advisory bodies, professional associations, scientific committees, and collaborative leadership initiatives that shape research agendas across Africa.

Over time, they gain recognition as subject-matter experts and research leaders, taking on roles in advisory bodies, scientific committees, and institutional leadership, and contributing to the development of the next generation of researchers.





4. Research Culture & Environment

This domain addresses the institutional conditions required to sustain researcher development and research excellence, recognising that individual capacity must be supported by enabling environments.

Through institutional strengthening initiatives, leadership engagement, mentorship development, and researcher development programmes, AREF contributes to embedding policies, practices, and norms that promote transparent career progression, protected research time, and sustained researcher development. The AREF Alumni Network reinforces these efforts by facilitating the exchange of good practice, peer support, and institutional learning across the network.

At the institutional level, these changes contribute to stronger governance structures, more supportive research environments, and sustainable systems for talent development. At the ecosystem level, the sharing of experiences and successful models through the alumni network contributes to stronger research systems and more enabling environments for research excellence across Africa.

This domain reflects a transition from isolated capacity gains to institutionalised systems, where research excellence and early-career development are embedded as organisational priorities.

5. Innovation & Socio-Economic Impact

This domain captures the ultimate translation of research into innovation, enterprise, and real- world impact, including the development of patents, marketable products, spin-outs and other translational outputs, contributing to Africa's knowledge economy and sustainable development. It also recognises the growing importance of emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI) and digital innovation, in accelerating research, improving health outcomes, and enhancing Africa's global research competitiveness. The domain addresses a current gap in structured support and recognition for research translation, innovation, and commercialisation among African ECRs relative to international peers.

By strengthening research translation, technology transfer, innovation, and socio-economic impact, researchers move beyond knowledge generation to developing solutions, engaging with industry, and contributing to economic and societal value creation. AREF supports this transition by promoting industry-led mentorship, fostering translational research within its fellowship programmes, encouraging an innovation and entrepreneurial mindset among emerging research leaders, and building awareness of how AI and other digital technologies can responsibly accelerate research, innovation, and evidence- informed decision-making. The AREF Alumni Network creates opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration, partnership development, and the exchange of ideas that support innovation and impact.

At the institutional level, innovation activities strengthen partnerships with industry, government, and civil society while enhancing institutions' capacity to translate research into practical applications. At the ecosystem level, alumni collaborations contribute to innovation ecosystems, policy influence, entrepreneurship, and the development of solutions that address Africa's health and development priorities.

This domain reflects a progression from research outputs to tangible impact, including innovations, partnerships, job creation, and contributions to policy and practice.

These five domains are mutually reinforcing:

- **Funding** enables research activity
- **Outputs** disseminate knowledge and establish credibility
- **Leadership** drives influence and direction
- **Institutions** sustain and scale impact
- **Innovation** translates research into real-world change

Together, they form a coherent pathway through which AREF supports the transformation from **individual researcher development to system-level impact and health transformation across Africa**.

Cross-Cutting **Themes**

These pathways of change are further reinforced by a set of cross- cutting themes that act as strategic enablers across the Theory of Change:

> Rather than operating within a single domain, they influence and strengthen progress across multiple pathways simultaneously, helping to create the conditions necessary for sustainable, equitable, and long-term change. By enhancing connectivity, inclusiveness, resilience, and collective action, these cross-cutting themes amplify the effectiveness of AREF's interventions and contribute to the achievement of its intended impact.



Knowledge Economy & Societal Impact

AREF Alumni Network

Equity & Inclusion

Climate Change & Environmental Sustainability

Knowledge Economy & Societal Impact

AREF recognises that strong research systems contribute not only to scientific advancement but also to economic growth, innovation, improved health outcomes, and sustainable development. While AREF's primary interventions focus on strengthening researchers, institutions, and research ecosystems, these investments are intended to contribute to a broader knowledge economy in which research informs policy, drives innovation, attracts investment, and generates societal value.

Through its programmes, partnerships, and alumni network, AREF seeks to strengthen the visibility, influence, and value of African research, while contributing to greater recognition of the importance of research and innovation by governments, funders, industry, and other stakeholders across the continent. By supporting researchers to engage with national priorities, policy processes, and local stakeholders, AREF aims to contribute to strengthening the conditions for increased domestic investment in research and more sustainable, locally led research systems across Africa. This includes supporting researchers to develop the skills and opportunities needed for innovation and commercialisation, thereby increasing the societal and economic return on research investments.

AREF Alumni Network (Community)

AREF recognises that sustainable research leadership depends not only on individual skills and institutional support, but also on access to strong professional networks that facilitate collaboration, mentorship, knowledge exchange, and collective leadership.

Through its programmes, AREF has built a diverse network of researchers, mentors, institutional leaders, and partners across Africa and internationally. The network provides opportunities for peer learning, collaboration, mentoring, joint research, grant development, and knowledge sharing, helping researchers build lasting professional relationships beyond individual programmes.

AREF ALUMNI NETWORK

By sustaining these connections over time, the AREF Alumni Network contributes to a more connected, collaborative, and influential African research ecosystem, supporting researchers to become research leaders in Africa and for Africa.



Equity and Inclusion

Equity and inclusion are central to AREF's Theory of Change. The organisation recognises that structural inequalities (related to gender, geography, language, and institutional context) continue to shape who participates in research and who benefits from it.

AREF actively works to address these barriers by promoting inclusive access, supporting underrepresented groups, and ensuring that programmes are responsive to diverse needs. This includes flexible delivery approaches, targeted outreach, and support mechanisms that enable participation from researchers who might otherwise be excluded.

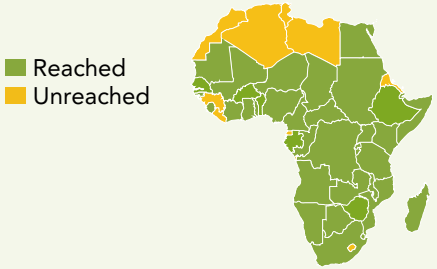
By embedding equity across all stages of the pathway, AREF strengthens both the fairness and the effectiveness of its interventions, ensuring that a diverse range of researchers are able to contribute to and benefit from strengthened research systems.

Total % Participation in AREF Programmes by Gender (October 2026)



Men - 52%
Women - 48%

Trained researchers from 43 out of 54 African countries, achieving an 80% continental footprint.



Climate Change & Environmental Sustainability

AREF recognises climate change as one of the most significant and growing threats to health, wellbeing, and sustainable development across Africa. Strengthening Africa's research leadership therefore requires building the capacity of researchers and institutions to understand, investigate, and respond to the health impacts of climate and environmental change.

Across its programmes, AREF seeks to support researchers working on climate-sensitive health challenges, promote interdisciplinary collaboration, and encourage consideration of environmental sustainability within research design, implementation, and knowledge translation. Through its training programmes, fellowships, partnerships, and alumni network, AREF aims to contribute to the development of research leaders capable of generating evidence and solutions that address emerging environmental and public health priorities. AREF will also seek opportunities to support researchers in accessing funding, partnerships, and leadership opportunities related to climate, environment, and planetary health.

AREF is also committed to environmentally responsible programme delivery, including reducing unnecessary travel where appropriate through virtual and hybrid approaches, promoting sustainable event practices, and integrating environmental considerations into organisational planning, evaluation, and decision-making processes.

By embedding climate and environmental considerations across its researcher development activities, AREF seeks to contribute to resilient research systems that are better equipped to respond to the evolving health challenges facing Africa.





Detailed Theory of Change Diagram

The **Detailed Theory of Change Diagram** below illustrates how AREF's interventions contribute to change across individual, institutional, and ecosystem levels, highlighting the interconnections between the five domains of change and the cross-cutting themes that reinforce them.

AREF Activities

Experiential Learning & Skills Development
- Grant writing workshops
- Publication writing workshops and retreats
- Leadership training
- Equitable partnerships workshops

Research Practice, Culture & Funding
- Fellowship placements at top universities and research institutions
- Seed funding and pilot project support
- Institutional embedding grants and projects for researcher development

Mentorship, Coaching & Peer Learning
- One-to-one mentoring
- One-to-one coaching
- Peer mentoring
- Action Learning Groups (peer learning sessions)

Networking, Collaboration & Partnerships
- Networking opportunities andevents
- Alumni engagement platforms
- Co-creation of equitable collaboration frameworks
- Equitable partnership design and governance
- Working in partnership with international and African research institutions

Equity & Inclusion
- Targeted outreach and inclusive recruitment
- Accessible programme delivery
- Transparent and equitable selection processes
- Financial and participation support mechanisms
- Inclusive programme design and facilitation
- Tailored support for underrepresented groups

Outcome P athways

Mentorship & Supervision: Researchers provide effective mentorship and supervision to juniors. + Research Collaboration & Network Expansion: Researchers build and engage in expanded collaborative networks.		Career Advancement & Leadership	Progression of researchers into independent, influential leadership roles within academia, research systems, and innovation ecosystems.
Research Specialisation & Expertise: Researchers have defined niches and strengthened technical expertise.		Research Output & Publications	Increased production, quality, and influence of research outputs that contribute to scientific knowledge and evidence-informed decision- making.
		Innovation & Socio-Economic Impact	Strengthened translation of research into innovation, enterprise, and real-world application, generating measurable economic and societal value across Africa.
Application of Skills and Research Practice: Researchers consistently apply and integrate skills into practice.		Research Funding & Grants	Enhanced capacity and competitiveness to secure substantive research funding
Knowledge Sharing & Learning: Researchers share knowledge and embed learning across institutions. + Policy and Systems Strengthening: Institutions implement policies that enable supportive research careers.		Research Culture & Environment	Strengthened institutional research environments that foster excellence, collaboration, mentorship, and sustained development of early-career researchers.

Impact

African researchers lead competitive, collaborative, and equitable research from Africa, shape research agendas, influence policy and practice, thereby driving sustainable improvements in health and development outcomes across Africa and globally.

EQUITY & INCLUSION

Key Assumptions

- Access to and competitiveness for relevant research funding opportunities.
- Availability of resources and platforms to produce and publish quality research.
- Functioning systems for translating research into innovation and socio-economic impact .
- Existence of fair and accessible career progression and leadership opportunities.
- Institutional commitment to strengthening research culture and ECR development.
- Researchers have the agency and institutional support to apply equitable principles in the design and management of their research partnerships
- Programme design and selection processes actively promote inclusive participation and reduce structural barriers for underrepresented groups

Key: Activities | Intermediate Outcomes | Domains of Change | Long-Term Outcomes | Assumptions

The Intended **Impact**

Through this integrated and evidence-informed approach, AREF contributes to a future in which:

African researchers lead competitive, collaborative, and equitable research from Africa, shaping research agendas, influencing policy and practice, and driving sustainable improvements in health and development outcomes across the continent and globally.

This vision reflects a shift towards stronger, more inclusive, and more self-sustaining research systems in Africa where researchers are empowered not only to succeed individually, but to lead collectively and transform the environments in which they work.



The Stepping Stones to **research independence**

The early career researcher



Participates in AREF's Grant Writing Programme

Exploration

Competes for and wins an AREF Research Development Fellowship Award or Seed Fund

Writes and wins own substantive grant

Progression

Participates in AREF's Research Leadership Development training

Independence

Becomes an independent Investigator, contributing to improved health and lives saved

Leadership

Approximately 10 years

A Learning **Journey**

AREF's Theory of Change is dynamic and evolving. The organisation recognises that outcomes are shaped by context, readiness, and enabling conditions, and that change does not occur uniformly across settings. As such, it represents AREF's contribution to strengthening research leadership and research systems, rather than direct attribution of long-term impacts.

Through continuous reflection on experience and evidence, AREF refines its understanding of **what works, for whom, and under what conditions**, enabling it to maximise its contribution to research leadership and capacity strengthening across Africa. As a living framework, the Theory of Change is reviewed annually to ensure that its interventions remain relevant and that its underlying assumptions continue to reflect evolving contexts.

Evidence generated through AREF's monitoring, evaluation, and learning processes informs strategic decision-making, programme design, and continuous improvement, ensuring that the organisation's work remains evidence-informed, needs-driven, and impact-oriented.



Risks & Mitigation

AREF recognises that the achievement of long-term outcomes depends not only on its programmes and partnerships, but also on a range of external factors that are beyond its direct control. These include the availability of domestic and international research funding, the ability of African institutions to retain talented researchers, political and economic stability, and the broader policy and research environment. Such constraints may influence the pace and extent to which individual, institutional, and ecosystem-level changes are realised.

To help mitigate these risks, AREF adopts a diversified and adaptive approach to researcher and institutional development. Through leadership development, grant-writing support, equitable partnerships, institutional engagement, and a strong Alumni Network, AREF seeks to strengthen researchers' resilience, expand opportunities for collaboration and funding, and reinforce institutional capacity. AREF also embraces continuous learning and adaptive management, regularly reviewing its Theory of Change and programmes to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities while maximising its contribution to strengthening African research leadership and research systems.

Key Risks	Mitigation Strategies
Brain drain and researcher retention	Alumni engagement, institutional partnerships, leadership development and career support
Limited domestic research investment and changing funding landscape	Diversified funding sources, grant-writing support, strategic partnerships and advocacy for research investment
Institutional inertia and competing priorities	Engagement with institutional leaders, mentorship systems and capacity strengthening
Political, economic or public health instability	Flexible programme delivery, adaptive management, and regional partnerships
Limited collaboration and networking opportunities	Alumni Network, cross-country collaborations, equitable partnerships and knowledge-sharing platforms



Theory of Change