

Strengths-based Practice

From deficit to strength: Shifting from 'what is wrong' to 'what is strong'

Strengths-based approaches are fundamental to successful settlement. Refugees and migrants have extensive, diverse, and dynamic strengths as they build new lives in Australia.

Strengths-based is one of the 10 Key Settlement Sector Principles and Practice outlined in the [Settlement Sector Quality Framework](#).

'A strengths-based approach values and emphasises the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in individuals, families and communities.'

Practitioners and organisations that work in this way do so in collaboration, by helping people to do things for themselves. As a result, people become co-producers of the services and supports they wish to use.

Settlement services draw upon existing strengths to help build stronger, more sustainable individuals, families and communities.'

Building on the Settlement Sector Quality Framework, strengths-based is one of the underpinning principles of the [National Workforce Competencies for Settlement Practitioners](#).

'Strengths-based means an approach to practice that focuses on the inherent strengths of individuals, families, and communities, and tapping into those strengths to facilitate enhanced outcomes.'

It is sometimes easy to slip into deficit framing in our work with people who have experienced trauma, overcome tremendous hardships, and face a number of barriers as they settle in a new country: *What is wrong? What are the needs? What are the barriers? Where are the gaps?*

This Settlement Insights Special Edition Publication, *From deficit to strength: Shifting from 'what is wrong' to 'what is strong'*, identifies that tension and responds to it with a powerful set of contributions from across Australia. These contributions work at multiple levels: from asset-based community development (ABCD) approaches to the strengths that individual refugees and migrants bring to their own settlement journeys. Strength-based recognises people as experts in their own lives, with existing (and continually developing) knowledge and resources to build on. Refugees and migrants are not simply recipients of support, but leaders, connectors, and sources of knowledge.

Contributors explore how strength-based approaches can strengthen relationships, support client-led goals, recognise community leadership, and build more responsive systems. Together, these reflections invite us to consider not only what support is needed, but what is already strong, and how settlement practice can build from there.



In this edition, which is the first volume of two planned publications, the contributions are:

- 1. Namam Salih, Client Service Programs Manager, Australian Refugee Association** – on reframing settlement practice from deficit to strength through everyday case management.
- 2. Vivian Mai, PhD Candidate UNSW, Professor Angela Nickerson, Program Director and Lecturer UNSW, and David Keegan, Senior Lecturer Excelsia University College and HOST International** – on the evidence base for protective and promotive factors in refugee mental health.
- 3. Andrea Obeyesekere, General Manager, Centacare FNQ** – on how asset-based community development (ABCD) gave rise to a thriving multicultural leadership network in Far North Queensland.
- 4. Ali Reid, Community Development Officer, STARTTS** – on a peer-led support program for Yazidi survivors and what it demonstrates about strength-based practice in regional settings.
- 5. Buli Camara, Stakeholder Engagement Manager, CORE Community Services** – on how the Fairfield City-based Community Capacity Building Working Group (CCBWG) is building community capacity through a strengths-based lens.

This edition includes discussions of trauma, loss, modern slavery and sexual violence, and displacement.

From Deficit to Strength: Reframing Settlement Practice



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Seeing strength is not a shift in language; it is a shift in practice.

At the [Australian Refugee Association \(ARA\)](#), this means looking beyond immediate challenges to recognise and work with the capabilities people already bring to their settlement journey.

In settlement work, we regularly respond to urgent and complex needs, including housing instability, financial stress, grief, disability, and social isolation. These realities are integral to settlement support. However, what shapes long-term outcomes is not only how we respond to challenges, but how we intentionally recognise and build on the strengths and capabilities people already hold.

At ARA, our practice is grounded in partnership. People are not passive recipients of support; they are active contributors to their own settlement journey. This means deliberately working alongside individuals to identify their skills, experiences, networks, and aspirations, and building on these as the foundation for action.

This approach does not minimise hardship. Instead, it holds a dual focus of acknowledging challenges while intentionally working with strengths. The relationship between practitioner and client becomes central. When people feel seen beyond their circumstances, trust grows, engagement deepens, and outcomes become more sustainable.

In practice, this shift begins with how we listen and the questions we ask:

- ***What has helped you manage so far?***
- ***Who supports you?***
- ***What are you proud of?***
- ***What would you like your future to look like?***

These conversations reposition individuals as capable and resourceful, rather than defined by need, and create space for people to define their own goals.

This way of working is reflected in the everyday practice of ARA's SETS case managers:

Leanne Farache illustrates this through her work with a young client who had recently lost his mother and taken on the responsibility for caring for his younger brother. Alongside grief and financial pressure, she identified strengths such as responsibility, resilience, and willingness to engage. Leanne says, *"Together, we worked toward practical goals like obtaining his driver's licence and seeking employment."* Referrals were framed not only as immediate support, but as pathways to independence, reinforcing confidence and long-term stability.

Roy Peng Nawl highlights how recognising existing skills can shift outcomes. Many clients initially view limited English as a barrier to employment or citizenship. By acknowledging their prior experience in trades such as painting, tiling, carpentry, and bricklaying, Roy reframes barriers into opportunities. Roy notes, *"When clients recognise their own skills and experiences, they become more confident and motivated to take steps towards employment and citizenship."* Through targeted training, industry connections, and citizenship guidance, clients translate their strengths into tangible outcomes, increasing confidence and engagement.

Bhupal Poudel further demonstrates how this approach supports families facing layered pressures. One client was supporting a family of six, including a child with an intellectual disability, while navigating financial hardship, housing instability, and frustration from previous service experiences. Rather than focusing solely on the crisis, Bhupal identified key strengths including resilience, proactive help-seeking, commitment to family, prior work experience, and motivation for change. Bhupal explains that *"recognising his strengths shifted his mindset from frustration to planning and decision-making for his family's future."* By providing clear system information, supporting housing pathways, and linking him to employment services, the client moved from frustration to active engagement.

These examples show that meaningful change often begins with small but intentional shifts in everyday practice. However, sustaining this approach is not without challenges. Urgent needs, system pressures, and high caseloads can draw practitioners toward immediate problem-solving, making it harder to consistently centre strengths.

At ARA, we recognise that maintaining this way of working requires ongoing reflection and commitment. It is most effective when systems and funding models allow practitioners the time and flexibility to work relationally, not only reactively.





For practitioners and policymakers, several considerations emerge:

- Invest in relationship-building as the foundation of effective support
- Ensure individuals lead their own goal-setting and decision-making
- Actively identify and reflect on strengths in every interaction
- Connect people to community networks as well as formal services
- View challenges as opportunities for growth and skill development

Ultimately, this is about how we see people, and how systems respond to them. When individuals are recognised for what they can do and supported to build their strengths, they are more likely to navigate settlement with confidence and independence.

When we change how we see people, we do not just change practice; we change what becomes possible.

Namam Salih is the Client Service Programs Manager at the Australian Refugee Association (ARA), providing strategic leadership across settlement, domestic and family violence (DFV) prevention, early intervention and response, child wellbeing, and community programs. With over 25 years of experience locally and internationally, she leads culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and strengths-focused practice that centres client voice. Namam has contributed to systems reform and developed CALD-specific models and workforce approaches.

Understanding Pathways to Positive Refugee Mental Health



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Towards a strengths-based approach

Too often, research conducted with refugee communities has operated on a deficit framework, spotlighting poor mental health outcomes and focussing efforts on identifying factors that place people from refugee backgrounds at greater risk of mental ill health. While it is true and important that refugees experience persecution, human rights violations and other adversities that can lead to persistent, poor mental health outcomes, it should be simultaneously acknowledged that not all refugees develop mental health difficulties: around two-thirds of people from refugee backgrounds do not report psychological symptoms at a level that requires clinical intervention.

Resilience is an important part of the refugee experience, and yet little work has been done to understand the different factors that might protect or promote better mental health among people from refugee backgrounds. As a result, there has been no accessible evidence base to inform proactive, strengths-based settlement policy for supporting refugee mental health throughout their displacement and resettlement.



A review of the research literature

To fill this gap, we conducted a systematic review. This process involved searching four electronic research databases, conducting two rounds of screening across 3,466 studies, and extracting and synthesising 704 unique findings from a final set of 174 relevant studies. Based on the country in which the studies took place, the findings were also labelled as either high-income (HIC) or low- and middle-income (LMIC) countries to allow us to understand the unique opportunities and vulnerabilities of different contexts. We then combined all the data to identify protective or promotive factors by considering the quality and consistency across findings.

Factors associated with better mental health outcomes

The factors with a ‘strong’ level of evidence, across HICs and LMICs, are summarised below. These factors have been categorised into four broad domains: sociodemographic characteristics, environmental (external) factors, sociocultural factors, and psychological (internal) factors. For brevity, we have left out factors with moderate evidence.

Table 1. Factors with strong level of evidence

	Sociodemographic	Environmental	Sociocultural	Psychological
HICs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male gender/sex • Younger age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure visa status • Employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support networks • Social support • Social engagement • Engagement with own/host community • Host language proficiency • Religious coping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cognitive strategies • Self-efficacy • Resilience
LMICs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male gender/sex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Income 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social engagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • N/A

Lessons and recommendations for the sector

Identifying vulnerable groups and tailoring support

Across HICs and LMICs, being male was associated with better mental health outcomes. A review such as this cannot tell us why this is the case, but we can hypothesise that it may relate to the nature of the trauma that female refugees experience, as well as the differential access to employment, financial, and/or educational opportunities for women. In HICs, there was also evidence that being younger was associated with better outcomes. Broadly, this evidence suggests we should work towards identifying vulnerable groups and providing tailored programming.

Creating a sense of safety and predictability

After extended exposure to danger and uncertainty, people from refugee backgrounds benefit from feeling a sense of safety and predictability. This includes having a permanent visa status, employment, income, housing, and more. There is also moderate evidence that psychological feelings of control were related to better outcomes.

Providing nuanced social programs

Social engagement and support were broadly associated with better mental health outcomes, particularly when this support was provided by family. This relationship becomes more complex when caring responsibilities are considered. However, there was moderate evidence that being childless is associated with better outcomes. This complexity suggests that we need to be more targeted in our social programming; family reunification pathways should be prioritised, and support for caring responsibilities (such as access to childcare) should also be considered.

Building internal coping systems

The research shows that internal capacities, whether this is confidence in one's ability to influence one's future (self-efficacy) or being able to adaptively reframe a stressful situation (cognitive strategies), are related to better mental health outcomes among people from refugee backgrounds. Practitioners and policymakers should prioritise access to mental health services that help people develop or sustain these psychological skills.

The future is strengths-based

Resilience is the norm rather than the exception for many refugees. While people from refugee backgrounds do generally have greater settlement needs than other migrant communities, support services can foster individual and community strengths while simultaneously addressing the systemic barriers.

Learn more about these and other protective and promotive factors in the summary report

The full findings from this systematic review are also published in *Nature Mental Health* with the reference:

Nickerson, A., Mai, V., Keegan, D., Willoughby, C., Humphreys, K., Im, J., Sundram, S., Procter, N., Seidler, Z., Scharpf, F., & Liddell, B. (2024). A systematic review of protective and promotive factors in refugee mental health. *Nature Mental Health*, 2(11). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44220-024-00336-9>

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From Deficit to Strength: Where Community Leadership Thrives

In settlement work, the question we ask shapes everything that follows. When we begin with “what is wrong,” we risk overlooking the extraordinary strength already present within communities. In Cairns, a deliberate shift to asking “what is strong” didn’t just improve engagement; it transformed how leadership, connection, and impact are understood across an entire region.



In 2019, [Centacare FNQ](#) was approached following concerns about a fragmented and disengaged Multicultural Reference Group for the region. Representation had been determined through a rigid approach that prioritised qualifications, titles, and institutional recognition, overlooking the deeply respected cultural leaders present within communities. The result was disconnection, mistrust, and communities stepping away.

Instead of redesigning from the top down, Centacare FNQ took a different approach, one grounded in asset-based community development (ABCD). The shift was simple but powerful. Start with what is already strong: relationships, lived experience, and cultural authority.

From this, the FNQ Multicultural & Faith Leaders Network was born.

The premise was disarmingly simple: anyone who saw themselves as a leader could belong. No gatekeeping. No imposed hierarchy. Leadership was recognised by community, not credentials. Today, the network connects more than 45 cultural and faith communities across Far North Queensland.

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What has emerged is far more than a network; it is an ecosystem of leadership.

These leaders have been supported to build and nurture their own relationships across sectors. They engage directly with government, access grant opportunities, meet with philanthropic funders, and partner with the business sector. They do not wait to be included. They are already at the table, and they include everyone, shaping outcomes.

And they don't just inform services; they now deliver them. Across the region, leaders help drive employment programs, co-facilitate parenting initiatives, support youth engagement, and co-design arts and cultural programs with regional partners. They share governance structures, exchange knowledge, and strengthen one another, supporting each other through both challenges and successes. When one community learns, all communities benefit. When one thrives, the network rises together.

They thrive in the everyday moments that matter most, supporting young people, strengthening families, and having open minds and willing hearts in creating pathways where none existed before. This is the real shift from deficit to strength. It is not about building systems for communities, but building them together, through open and honest conversations, shared accountability, and the hard work of real change. It is about recognising and elevating existing strengths while partnering across sectors to create something stronger. Above all, it is about trusting leadership that is relational, culturally grounded, and deeply connected.

The FNQ Multicultural & Faith Leaders Network shows what is possible when we invest in what is already working. The result is not just stronger communities, but stronger partnerships, more responsive systems, and leadership that is sustainable because it is owned.

In settlement work, the message is clear: communities are not waiting to be fixed. They are already leading. And when we recognise that, they don't just participate. They thrive.

As Anna Jones, President of the [Cairns African Association](#), reflects:

"This network works because it belongs to the people. We share our knowledge, our challenges, and our opportunities. We lift each other up, whether it's navigating funding, supporting families, or celebrating success. It's not one voice, it's many voices moving together."

And they are thriving.

They thrive in crisis. During COVID-19 and during disaster events like cyclones and floods, they mobilised to support vulnerable families, working alongside Queensland Police and other regional services to ensure communities remain safe and informed. They thrive in advocacy, leading anti-racism forums across education, health, and justice, ensuring lived experience is not just heard but valued. They thrive in connection, showing up for each other's festivals, celebrating milestones, and being there when another community is mourning and hurting. They are building a shared sense of belonging.

Andrea Obeyesekere is the General Manager of Multicultural Services at Centacare Far North Queensland, bringing over 20 years of experience across the legal, education, and community service sectors. She leads an award-winning multidisciplinary team delivering humanitarian settlement, employment and training, community engagement, neighbourhood centres, family and school engagement, and disaster recovery and resilience initiatives. Andrea is recognised for advancing inclusive, community-driven approaches that support people of refugee and migrant backgrounds to participate fully in regional communities. Her work builds strong partnerships between community, industry, and government to strengthen social cohesion, employment pathways, and community resilience.

Beyond Survival: Collective Healing Through Peer Support



In Wagga Wagga, NSW, a peer-led support group for Yazidi women who survived Islamic State captivity provides a compelling example of strength-based settlement practice in a regional context. The women were enslaved by ISIS during the 2014 Yazidi genocide in Iraq and are now resettled in Australia through humanitarian pathways. Sold through slave markets into domestic and sexual servitude, the women endured and survived unspeakable suffering.

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While their experiences and the resulting legacy of grief and trauma are central to understanding support needs, they do not define the totality of who these women are, or the basis upon which effective settlement practice can be built.

In early 2025, STARTTS hosted a visit by [Dr James Cockayne, the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner](#). This visit created a rare opportunity to formally recognise Yazidi women in the region as victims of modern slavery and to centre their voices in that recognition.

A key insight from these discussions was that despite living in the same region, many survivors had limited connection with one another, and many were navigating recovery in relative isolation. In response, [STARTTS](#) established the Yazidi Survivors Peer Support Program with funding secured through a [Murrumbidgee Primary Health Network](#) Psychosocial Grant.

The program adopted the Relational Remedy Framework, developed by [Survivor Connections](#). The Framework is centred on lived experience, relational connection, and the collective rebuilding of agency.¹ This ensured the program was grounded in survivor leadership and informed by evidence-based practice. The guiding principles of the framework include creating safety, building trust, and fostering connection and collaboration. These principles support a shift away from traditional service-recipient models, recognising instead the capacity of survivors to stand in solidarity and heal collectively.

The program combines weekly group meetings with therapeutic and community-based activities, including family camps, gentle exercise, mindfulness, yoga, creative workshops, and community excursions. These activities are integral to rebuilding social connection, confidence, and a sense of belonging.

Participants are supported by STARTTS bicultural support officers, community development workers, and trauma counsellors. However, the primary mechanism of support and growth within the group is peer-based connection. The most significant outcomes emerge through the relationships the women form with one another. The women are connected in profound ways through their shared experiences of survival, and this depth of connection underpins the effectiveness of the program.

Valuing peer support requires workers to rethink traditional service roles — shifting away from expert-led models towards facilitation, partnership, and walking alongside participants.

However, strength-based practice does not negate the ongoing structural barriers faced by participants. In regional settlement areas, access to affordable psychiatric and psychological services remains limited. Pathways to family reunion, legal redress, and long-term settlement stability are often complex and protracted. These systemic constraints can reinforce deficit-oriented approaches within service systems.

Support services must therefore navigate a dual responsibility: to advocate for systemic reform while maintaining a practice framework that centres strength, agency, and lived experience. This includes challenging dominant narratives that position people with lived experience of modern slavery primarily as vulnerable subjects, rather than as individuals with capacity, expertise, and the potential to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

The recovery journey is long. The Yazidi Survivors Peer Support Program demonstrates that settlement practice grounded in strength does not minimise the legacy of profound trauma and grief — rather, it acknowledges both the realities of past harm and the enduring strength, agency, and capacity of those who have survived it.

¹ Survivor Connections (2025), Relational Remedy: A Peer Support Framework for the Australian Antislavery Sector.

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Strength-Based Settlement: A Closer Look at Community Capacity Building Approaches



Buli Camara

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The way the settlement sector frames people and communities has a significant impact on the outcomes of refugee and migrant settlement. Too often, the starting point is a focus on what is missing, leading to needs- or gaps-based analyses. These assessments are frequently shaped by institutional benchmarks, rather than by the lived realities and strengths of the communities themselves. As a result, programs are designed around perceived deficiencies, and success is measured by the extent to which those “gaps” have been addressed.

This creates a narrow and incomplete picture of the people we support. The long-term consequences of this not only shape how services perceive communities but also how communities perceive themselves. [The Fairfield City-based Community Capacity Building Working Group \(CCBWG\)](#) was formed in response to this framing and deficit thinking. Since its establishment in 2024, the Working Group has convened regularly with community and association leaders to gain direct insight into the priorities and challenges facing their communities. The perspectives and issues raised through these consultations play a central role in shaping the Working Group’s focus and informing its ongoing work.

The Working Group adopts a strengths-based approach to settlement work by building the capacity of community leaders and ethno-specific community organisations, equipping them with essential knowledge, skills, and resources to effectively support and strengthen their communities, particularly recently arrived refugees and migrants. Rather than asking “*what is the problem?*” it asks: “*What is already working? What strengths exist that we can build on?*”

This approach recognises that refugees and migrants are not passive recipients of settlement support, but active contributors who bring valuable knowledge, experience, and capability. It shifts the focus from addressing perceived deficits to enabling and harnessing community potential.



The CCBWG harnesses the potential of community leaders and ethno-specific community organisations by facilitating access to essential resources, venues, facilities, critical information, and network-building platforms that are often beyond the reach of emerging community organisations. It plays a critical role in supporting effective settlement and integration outcomes.

Most community organisations are led by dedicated volunteers who balance these responsibilities alongside their own family and livelihood commitments. As a result, they often require targeted support and guidance to sustain their efforts and continue serving their communities effectively. The Fairfield City-based CCBWG provides support when it is sought. In doing so, it asks *“what is strong?”* rather than *“what is wrong?”* When these strengths are recognised and valued, settlement journeys can change positively. Refugees and migrants are best placed to tell their own stories and to identify both their strengths and what they need to build on them.

About the CCB Working Group

The Community Capacity Building Working Group (CCBWG) is an initiative of Fairfield Multicultural Interagency. Members of the working group include the Assyrian Resource Centre, CORE Community Services, Fairfield City Council, Family Planning Australia, Navitas Skilled Futures, South Western Sydney Local Health District, SSI, STARTTS, and TAFE NSW.

The CCBWG, over the past two years, has successfully planned and implemented: a Grant Writing Workshop, Domestic and Family Violence Workshops, Stress Management Workshops, and Faith and Community Leaders consultations. All of these workshops were delivered in collaboration with the attendees and at the community's request.

Buli Camara has extensive experience in stakeholder engagement and community development. He is passionate about building meaningful partnerships that empower communities and promote social cohesion. Currently serving as a Stakeholder Engagement Manager at CORE Community Services, he is committed to strength-based approaches that recognise the resilience, potential, and contributions of diverse communities. Buli has a strong background in leadership, advocacy, and fostering collaborative initiatives that create lasting social impact.

If you need support, help is available:

- Lifeline – 13 11 14 (24/7)
- 1800RESPECT – 1800 737 732 (24/7)
- Beyond Blue – 1300 22 4636 (24/7)

If you are in immediate danger, please call 000.



Settlement Insights was developed based on the continual discussions during SETSCoP meetings, events, and consultations, where policymakers and practitioners share insights on the latest settlement issues and trends.

The Settlement Engagement and Transition Support Community of Practice (SETSCoP) brings together service providers delivering the SETS program to collectively harness and maximise the sector's contribution to effective settlement of refugees and migrants in Australia.

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