

Strengths-based Practice Volume 2

Strengths-based approaches are fundamental to effective settlement practice. Strengths-based practice emphasises that people from refugee and migrant backgrounds hold skills, knowledge, relationships, cultural strengths, lived experience, leadership, and aspirations that shape their settlement journeys and strengthen the communities around them.

In Volume 1 of [Settlement Insights: Strengths-based Practice](#), published in May 2026, contributors explored this shift across evidence, casework, community leadership, regional practice, and community capacity building.

This second volume continues that conversation, moving from principle to practice across employment pathways, youth leadership, LGBTIQ+ safety, trust-building, refugee-led organisations, and organisational change.

In this second volume of Settlement Insights: Strengths-based Practice, the contributions are:

1. **Erika Lopez**, Community Programs and Practice Lead and Social Worker, Latin American Society of South Australia (LASSA) — on building trust through strengths-based intake, case planning, and culturally responsive settlement support.
2. **Rachna Muddagouni**, Migrant Information Centre (MIC) East Melbourne — on reframing settlement practice through capability, connection, and agency across youth, family, employment, and community development work.
3. **Stephanie Smith**, SETS Support Worker, **Nikki McNeilage**, SETS Support Worker, and **Emily Koppen**, Team Leader, Multicultural Services, Latrobe Community Health Service (LCHS) — on *From Here to Care*, a supported employment pathway connecting SETS clients with aged care workforce opportunities in Gippsland.
4. **David Drysdale**, Project Coordinator, and **Kelsey Dattoli**, Marketing and Communications Lead, Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre — on *Project Merah*, a youth-led anti-racism initiative that supports young people as peer educators, co-designers, and community leaders.
5. **Saina Avesta**, Founder and Principal Consultant, Avesta Advisory — on recognising strength beyond survival and creating safer, more intersection-informed settlement practice for LGBTIQ+ refugees.
6. **Mubashar Hasan**, Senior Project Officer, *Communities in Cultural Transition (CiCT)*, and **Jasmina Bajraktarevic-Hayward**, Community Services Program Coordinator, STARTTS — on what the CiCT project has taught STARTTS about walking alongside refugee-led organisations and supporting community-led settlement.

Building Trust by Recognising Strengths



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At the [Latin American Society of South Australia \(LASSA\)](#), building trust with our clients is at the heart of our work. From the very first conversation, including the intake assessment, we make a conscious effort to learn not only about a person's needs and challenges, but also about their strengths, achievements, aspirations and hopes for the future. This simple shift changes the direction of the conversation. Instead of focusing solely on barriers, it helps us build trust and rapport and gain a deeper understanding of the person behind the circumstances.

These conversations are an important part of developing case plans. When clients share their stories, professional experience, personal achievements, and the ways they have overcome challenges, we gain insight into the skills, knowledge, and resilience they already hold. This helps us work together to set realistic and achievable goals that build on existing strengths. In my experience, people are often more motivated to pursue their goals when they can see how their own abilities and experiences contribute to achieving them.

Erika Lopez is a Social Worker and Community Programs and Practice Lead at LASSA. She leads the SETS program, working alongside the South Australian Latin American community to support settlement, social inclusion, and community participation. Erika is passionate about empowering individuals and families, building strong community connections, and creating opportunities through culturally responsive, strengths-based practice.

Skills such as communication, problem-solving, leadership, adaptability, and teamwork do not disappear when someone moves to a new country. Many people from refugee and migrant backgrounds bring with them extraordinary resilience, determination, and the ability to navigate uncertainty. These qualities, often developed through complex and challenging experiences, can become powerful foundations for rebuilding lives and creating new opportunities.

At LASSA, we see the value of strengths-based practice every day. By recognising what people bring with them, rather than focusing only on what they need, we help create opportunities for confidence, independence, and belonging.

Most importantly, we support people to build on their strengths, reconnect with their sense of identity, and create a positive future for themselves and their families.

Reframing Settlement Through Capability, Connection, and Agency



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In settlement practice, the questions we ask shape the outcomes we achieve. For too long, systems have been oriented around a single question: *What is wrong?* What do people lack, what they need, what must be fixed? While this framing has often been driven by funding, reporting, and risk management requirements, it can unintentionally diminish the very capabilities that individuals and communities bring.

A strengths-based approach invites a different starting point: What is strong? What skills, knowledge, relationships, and resilience already exist, and how do we build from there?

In my work leading the [Migrant Information Centre \(MIC\)](#), I see every day that people arriving in Australia are not passive recipients of services. They are professionals, caregivers, entrepreneurs, cultural leaders, and community builders. Many have navigated complex migration journeys, demonstrating adaptability, courage, and persistence. Recognising this is not simply a philosophical shift — it fundamentally changes practice.

Shifting practice: from service delivery to partnership

At MIC, this shift has meant repositioning practitioners as partners rather than problem-solvers. In our work with disengaged refugee youth, initial assessments often framed young people in terms of risk — risk of disengagement, offending, or poor outcomes. By reframing our approach, staff began exploring identity, aspirations, and strengths: leadership potential, multilingual skills, cultural knowledge, and strong peer networks.

Through this lens, young people have co-designed activities, led peer engagement initiatives, and reconnected with education and training pathways — not because they needed to be fixed, but because their strengths were recognised and activated.

This approach requires time and trust. It means asking different questions:

- **What has worked for you before?**
- **Who do you trust and rely on?**
- **What are your goals, and what strengths will help you get there?**



Organisational models that enable strengths

Embedding strengths-based practice at MIC has required intentional organisational design. In our community development work, we prioritise co-design with culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Women's groups, for example, are not structured as service delivery forums but as platforms for leadership, connection, and collective action. Participants identify their own priorities, whether employment, education, or wellbeing, and shape program direction accordingly.

In our employment-focused initiatives, we have shifted from a narrow "job readiness" model to one that recognises overseas qualifications, informal skills, and entrepreneurial ambitions. In several cases, participants have moved into small business pathways or community-led enterprises, supported by their existing capabilities and networks — rather than being channelled into roles that do not reflect their qualifications and capabilities.

Navigating structural pressures

Despite these approaches, structural pressures remain. Funding models often prioritise outputs over outcomes, and reporting frameworks can reinforce deficit narratives we are working to dismantle. At MIC, we actively reframe these narratives, highlighting client achievements, leadership, and progression alongside compliance requirements.

Internally, we support practitioners through reflective practice and supervision to challenge deficit assumptions. This creates a culture where staff are encouraged to recognise and build on strengths, even within constrained systems.

What strengths-based practice looks like in action

Across MIC programs, strengths-based practice is visible in tangible ways. In youth programs, it looks like young people leading initiatives and mentoring peers. In family services, it means working with cultural strengths and extended family systems rather than imposing external models. In community capacity building, it involves supporting emerging leaders and community groups to drive their own priorities.

One recent example involved supporting a group of community members to establish their own peer-led support network, drawing on shared language, culture, and lived experience. Rather than positioning them as service recipients, the program recognised them as leaders and connectors within their communities.

Across all contexts, the common thread is agency — supporting people to make decisions, take ownership, and shape their futures.

A call to reframe

Shifting from deficit to strength is not about ignoring challenges. Rather, it is about addressing them in ways that recognise dignity, capability, and potential.

For the settlement sector, this is both an ethical and practical imperative. Achieving this at scale requires funding models that support systemic change and enable services to work beyond outputs and tick-boxes. When we lead with strength, we do more than support individuals — we enable communities to thrive.

Rachna Muddagouni was appointed CEO of the Migrant Information Centre in September 2024. She brings more than 25 years of leadership and management experience across the legal, health, public, and community sectors, and has dedicated her career to supporting and empowering disadvantaged and marginalised communities. Rachna holds an MBA, a Master of Public Policy, and a Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors qualification. She also holds certifications in quality accreditation, mediation, leadership, and facilitation. Her leadership is grounded in a commitment to social inclusion, equity, and diversity.

From Here to Care at Latrobe Community Health Service Case Study



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Latrobe Community Health Service (LCHS) is a major regional provider delivering a broad range of community health, settlement, and aged care services across Gippsland. There is a strong commitment to improving community wellbeing through inclusive, innovative, and person-centred services. Through this work, LCHS recognises the barriers many multicultural communities face in accessing employment and the growing demand for a skilled aged care workforce.

From Here to Care was developed within this context. The program brings together LCHS's Settlement Engagement and Transition Support (SETS) program and Your Care Choice (YCC) aged care team, alongside external partners to create meaningful employment pathways for SETS clients while strengthening LCHS's workforce and service delivery. The program reflects LCHS's broader commitment to equity, inclusion, and sustainable community impact.

A first-of-its-kind program in Gippsland, *From Here to Care* creates a direct pathway into the aged care workforce for multicultural clients engaged with the SETS program. It was developed to address gaps faced by migrant job seekers, including limited opportunities to build confidence in Australian workplaces and recruitment processes, and the need for supported pathways to demonstrate existing skills.

The program is delivered through internal collaboration between LCHS's SETS and YCC teams, in partnership with Community College Gippsland (CCG), TAFE Gippsland English classes, and the Local Jobs Program. It combines pre-accredited training, hands-on workplace experience, mentoring, and tailored recruitment support.

By building on participants' existing strengths, aspirations, and care experience, the program supports participants to build confidence, develop practical skills, and secure meaningful employment. The program also strengthens LCHS's workforce with skilled, diverse, and compassionate staff.

Program Design and Delivery

From Here to Care is a structured two-week employment and skills development program delivered at no cost to participants or LCHS. Funding is provided by the Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board, with additional funding used to support non-eligible clients and first aid training.

The model draws on LCHS's internal strengths as both a settlement and aged care provider. The SETS team supports participants before, during, and after the program, while the YCC team provides a direct connection to aged care roles, workplace expectations, and recruitment pathways.

Participants engage in:

- Industry-relevant pre-accredited training (including first aid and CPR)
- Hands-on workplace experience
- Employability and workplace readiness skill development
- Guidance to navigate recruitment and onboarding processes

A key feature of the program is a guaranteed interview with the YCC team for domestic assistant roles, along with a commitment to minimum paid work hours for successful candidates.

The program helps reduce systemic barriers such as language challenges, limited opportunities to gain local work experience, and limited familiarity with recruitment systems. In doing so, it creates a more inclusive and accessible pathway to employment.

Outcomes

The inaugural cohort included 13 participants, with 12 successfully completing the program.

Key outcomes include:

- 8 participants (67%) received employment offers
- 7 participants remain employed with LCHS, all receiving positive feedback
- 100% retention of those employed after 1 year
- 2 participants have since enrolled in a Certificate III in Aged Care to further their careers

Participants developed industry-specific skills, gained certifications, and strengthened their confidence and readiness for employment. SETS continues to support participants who did not gain employment through the program.



Impact and benefits

For participants and community:

- Increased confidence, independence, and employability
- Access to inclusive employment opportunities supporting social and economic participation
- Clear, supported pathways into the aged care sector
- Ongoing mentoring and support beyond program completion

For LCHS:

- Development of a culturally diverse, job-ready workforce
- Improved recruitment accessibility for multicultural applicants
- Strengthened collaboration between internal teams to achieve shared outcomes
- Stronger organisational understanding of systemic barriers, including documentation and visa requirements, to inform more inclusive recruitment practices

For the organisation and sector:

- Demonstrates a scalable, replicable model for workforce development
- Strengthens community connections and service delivery
- Reinforces LCHS's commitment to inclusion, innovation, and sustainable workforce solutions

From Here to Care bridges settlement support and employment by creating a practical, supported pathway into aged care. The program demonstrates what becomes possible when an organisation recognises both community strengths and workforce needs and adapts its systems to connect the two.

For participants, the program provides a pathway to build on existing strengths, gain local experience, and pursue meaningful work. For LCHS, it strengthens workforce diversity, improves recruitment accessibility, and supports more inclusive service delivery.

LCHS has received a lot of interest from other providers wanting to replicate the model, and planning is underway for a new cohort later this year.



Project Merah



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In 2025, [Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre](#) received funding from the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet to deliver [Project Merah](#), a peer-led youth anti-racism initiative. The program aims to build young people's confidence to navigate experiences of racism by supporting them to name, challenge, and safely report incidents while fostering personal and peer safety. It supports young people who experience racism, as well as those who witness it.

Project Merah is particularly timely given the documented rise in racism locally, nationally, and globally.¹ It responds to the need for practical, youth-led approaches that give young people tools to act, rather than simply raise awareness.

Youth Ambassadors

The project began by recruiting six young people from Melbourne's western suburbs, all from refugee and migrant backgrounds. These Youth Ambassadors brought significant strengths, including cultural knowledge, lived experience, responsibility, and strong aspirations.

They also brought unique insights into how racism impacts individuals and communities, as well as the ability to influence peers during critical stages of social and identity development. These qualities made them powerful contributors to youth-led anti-racism work. Spectrum recognised these capabilities and proudly supported them in their roles as Anti-Racism Youth Ambassadors.

Building the Project

Project Merahi is built on the foundations of Phase One: Spectrum's [Pathways to Resilience](#) program. In that earlier phase, newly arrived young people co-designed the [Staying Safe in a New Culture](#) resource, which supported young people to navigate life in Australia with confidence.

The resource focused on three key areas:

- identifying and reporting racism
- mental health and wellbeing
- legal rights and responsibilities

This work demonstrated that when young people are treated as genuine partners, they create resources that are practical, relevant, and grounded in lived experience. It also revealed a clear gap: young people wanted more than information. They wanted opportunities to build skills and actively engage in anti-racism work.

Project Merahi was designed as the next phase in this journey, centring young people's strengths and creating opportunities for them to lead.

The Youth Ambassadors first undertook comprehensive anti-racism training facilitated by Spectrum. Building on this learning, they participated in a multi-day co-design process to develop anti-racism workshops informed by their own experiences and insights.

With support from the Project Coordinator, the Ambassadors further developed the workshops into tailored presentations for schools, sporting clubs, and youth organisations across Melbourne's northern and western suburbs.

These sessions aimed to educate while amplifying youth voices and experiences of racism. They incorporated multimedia, research on the history and global context of racism, and exploration of its social, emotional, and physical impacts.

Story mapping played a central role by drawing on the Ambassadors' lived experiences. This informed interactive activities exploring:

- how racism manifests in different environments
- allyship and being an upstander
- strategies for safely responding to racism

Inclusive and culturally responsive activities ensured that participants from diverse backgrounds could engage meaningfully.

From deficit to strength

Working alongside the Youth Ambassadors highlighted that perceived "deficits" did not reflect young people's abilities or motivation. Instead, the gap existed in structural support and limited opportunities for young people to share their strengths and knowledge.

Project Merahi moved away from the idea that young people needed to be empowered, recognising that they already possessed agency and passion. Instead, the project concentrated on practical skill development, such as public speaking and facilitation.

The Project Coordinator supported this process by providing coaching, encouragement, and opportunities for real-world application, including connecting the Ambassadors with participating organisations. This helped ensure they were confident and prepared to deliver impactful sessions in the community.



Thinking differently about young people

A defining feature of *Project Merah* is its approach to youth participation. The program treats young people as partners who shape their own success, rather than passive recipients of support. It values their cultural knowledge, lived experience, and leadership.

The project places strong emphasis on agency, connection, and confidence at both individual and collective levels. It also challenges traditional definitions of success. While the program achieved meaningful outcomes in schools and community settings, some of the most significant impacts were often identified by the Ambassadors themselves.

For many Ambassadors, success included increased confidence, stronger connections to community, and a deeper sense of identity and belonging. These outcomes show why youth-led approaches matter: they recognise young people not for what they lack, but for the strengths, knowledge, and leadership they already bring. Project Merah demonstrates that when young people are supported as partners and leaders, anti-racism work becomes more practical, relational, and grounded in lived experience.

¹ In Australia, 89% of teenagers have witnessed racism, and nearly 70% of young people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds have been directly targeted by it. Read more in Spectrum. *Introducing Project Merah! A youth-led anti-racism initiative*, 23 March 2026. Available online at: <https://spectrumvic.org.au/news/project-merahi-youth-racism/>

David Drysdale is a seasoned youth practitioner with over two decades of experience working across diverse communities. Originally from London, his career began as a Referral Order Coordinator, supporting young people across a range of boroughs. For the past 15 years, David has called Australia home, where he has continued his commitment to youth work in Melbourne's western suburbs.

During his time in Australia, David spent 11 years working in a youth alcohol and other drugs (AOD) service, holding roles as a clinician, team leader, and briefly as a community manager. He has also contributed to the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) sector in Melbourne's north, where he supported young Aboriginal people through a throughcare program, assisting their transition from youth detention back to Country.

Currently, David is the Project Coordinator of Project Merah, a pilot anti-racism initiative at Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre. Deeply committed to social justice, his work is informed by a lifetime of lived experience with racism. This perspective drives his passion for advocating for equity and creating safer, more inclusive communities for young people.

Kelsey Dattoli is the Marketing and Communications Lead at Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre in Naarm (Melbourne). A proud Ngāpuhi/Ngāti Porou woman from Aotearoa New Zealand, she has unique lived experience both as a First Nations person and a migrant.

Kelsey is a keen advocate for anti-racism, creating equity, and ethical communications and PR. Her most recent published work, a case study on racism in Australian media, was created for Deakin University.



Recognising Strength Beyond Survival: A Strengths-Based Reflection on Supporting LGBTIQ+ Refugees



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My reflections come from lived experience as a trans woman from a refugee background, alongside years of direct practice, peer leadership, and community engagement with LGBTIQ+ refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia. Through this work, I have increasingly reflected on how strengths-based practice can unintentionally overlook the specific realities shaping the lives of forcibly displaced LGBTIQ+ people.

Strengths-based practice encourages settlement services to move beyond deficit-focused approaches and recognise the resilience, capabilities and potential that people bring with them. This shift is important. However, when working with LGBTIQ+ refugees, strengths-based practice also needs to account for the layered realities shaping safety, trust, belonging, and participation.

Understanding the journey behind the strengths

The refugee journey for many LGBTIQ+ people can differ significantly from broader understandings of refugee experiences, which are often understood through war, political instability, or collective displacement. Many LGBTIQ+ refugees flee not only state persecution, but also violence, rejection, and exclusion within their own families, communities and cultural environments because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Experiences of danger may continue throughout transit countries, where people often remain in prolonged uncertainty and “limbo” while continuing to navigate discrimination, invisibility and survival. These experiences shape not only trauma and settlement challenges, but also the strengths people carry into settlement.

Across years of practice and engagement with queer refugee communities, I have repeatedly witnessed extraordinary adaptability, persistence, creativity, multilingual communication skills, advocacy, community building, and problem-solving. Many people have spent years navigating unsafe environments while holding onto hope for a future where they can finally participate safely and fully in society.

Many arrive with aspirations to study, contribute professionally, support others, rebuild community, and reclaim parts of life that felt paused during displacement. These strengths should not be romanticised as products of hardship, but recognised as capabilities that exist alongside challenge.

When strengths are hidden by unsafe systems

At the same time, many strengths remain hidden or difficult to exercise when settlement systems do not fully recognise the intersecting realities influencing someone's experience.

Intersection-informed practice becomes essential here. While settlement services often focus appropriately on culture, ethnicity, and language, LGBTIQ+ refugees may also be navigating sexual orientation, gender identity, faith, trauma, migration pathways, community safety concerns and histories of exclusion that significantly shape how they engage with services and communities.

For example, an LGBTIQ+ refugee from Afghanistan may share some experiences with the broader Afghan community, while also experiencing fear, isolation, or risk within those same communities because of their identity. A settlement approach that appears appropriate through a cultural lens alone may unintentionally create harm if it does not also account for sexuality, gender identity, and safety.

I have seen situations where one unsafe or dismissive interaction with a service has significantly damaged a person's trust in the broader settlement system. Behaviours that may present as disengagement, independence, or reluctance to participate can sometimes reflect previous experiences of rejection, fear, or the need to constantly manage safety.

Settlement is also not always an immediate transition into belonging. For many LGBTIQ+ refugees, settlement can remain a liminal space where people continue negotiating visibility, trust, safety, and connection while trying to rebuild their lives.

Questions for reflective strengths-based practice

A strengths-based approach may become more effective when practitioners move beyond asking only *"What strengths does this person have?"* and begin asking:

- What has helped this person survive and protect themselves until now?
- What does safety mean for this individual?
- Which identities and experiences are shaping this person's settlement journey?
- Are there environments, communities, or supports this person may not feel safe accessing?
- What strengths may not yet be visible because trust or stability has not been established?
- How can services create conditions where this person feels safe enough to participate, connect, and grow?

These questions can help shift practice from assumptions about resilience towards a more relational and intersection-informed understanding of strength.





Creating conditions where strengths can emerge

Strengths-based practice should not only ask what strengths people already have, but also what conditions allow those strengths to emerge safely.

This requires more than goodwill. It requires workforce capability, reflective practice, meaningful engagement with lived and living experience, and approaches that recognise the full complexity of someone's journey.

Some important considerations for practice may include:

- Avoid assuming ethnicity or cultural background is the only relevant lens for support.
- Avoid pressuring disclosure around sexuality or gender identity before trust and safety are established.
- Recognise that chosen family, community, and informal peer networks may feel safer than traditional community structures for some individuals.
- Understand that limited help-seeking may sometimes reflect survival strategies rather than confidence or stability.
- Create flexible and person-centred approaches that allow people to engage at their own pace.
- Engage lived and living expertise meaningfully in workforce development, program design, and service improvement.

Creating relational safety, flexible support pathways and community-informed approaches can help people move beyond survival mode and begin exercising the strengths they already carry.

Strengths-based practice is not only about recognising resilience. It is also about creating environments where people feel safe enough to use their strengths, rebuild trust, and participate with dignity. The question is not whether strengths exist, but whether our systems create the conditions for those strengths to become visible and sustained.

Saina Avesta is the Founder and Principal Consultant of Avesta Advisory, specialising in trauma-informed workforce development and systems practice for organisations supporting LGBTIQ+ people from refugee and multicultural backgrounds. Drawing on lived experience as a trans woman from a refugee background alongside years of direct practice, peer leadership and community advocacy, her work focuses on translating lived realities into practical, safer, and more responsive settlement and service systems.

Walking Alongside: What CiCT Has Taught Us About Strengths-Based Settlement



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The [*Communities in Cultural Transition \(CiCT\)*](#) project was established by [STARTTS](#) in 2009 to work alongside refugee-led organisations and community leaders across New South Wales.

Since then, CiCT has partnered with more than 200 refugee-led organisations. This has included partnerships with Assyrian, Afghan, Chaldean, Congolese, Iranian, Palestinian, South Sudanese, Syrian, Tibetan, Ukrainian, and Uyghur communities across New South Wales. One of its founding ideas was that no single community development worker could reasonably provide every form of support that community organisations might require as they grow and evolve. Access to specialist consultants and partner organisations therefore became core to the project, alongside consultancy engagements, training, leadership retreats, the annual CiCT Forum, and partnerships such as the one with the Diplomacy Training Program (DTP).



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Refugee-led organisations are often established and sustained by volunteers. Community leaders organise cultural events, support newly arrived families, advocate for their communities, preserve language and culture, establish sporting clubs and arts groups, and create opportunities for connection and belonging. At the same time, they are navigating employment, family responsibilities, and their own settlement journeys.

Like any organisation, refugee-led organisations encounter practical challenges. They may need support with governance, strategic planning, financial management, insurance, risk management, grant writing, evaluation, media engagement, or policy advocacy. Traditional approaches to capacity development often respond to these challenges through training. Training remains an important part of CiCT, but experience suggests that a workshop alone is rarely enough. A one-day course does not create a governance specialist, an evaluator, or a communications expert. Nor would we expect it to.

Government departments, universities, and large non-government organisations regularly access specialist expertise when they need it. Lawyers, accountants, governance consultants, and evaluators contribute specialist knowledge while organisations retain responsibility for their direction and decision-making.

CiCT asked a simple question: *Why should refugee-led organisations be expected to work differently?*

Rather than beginning with deficits, CiCT starts by meeting with refugee-led organisations and identifying existing community assets. Organisations bring leadership, relationships, cultural knowledge, practical experience, and aspirations for the future. Conversations focus on community aspirations and the resources that might help achieve them. Gaps are identified in relation to community priorities rather than externally determined agendas.

CiCT then connects organisations with specialist consultants and partner organisations best placed to support their priorities. Learning becomes connected to meaningful practice. Organisations work with governance specialists while establishing committees and constitutions. They develop grant writing skills while preparing applications for projects they care about. Evaluation becomes relevant when communities want to understand the impact of their own work. Technical expertise supports community aspirations rather than directing them.

CiCT's partnership with the DTP provides one example of this approach. Community leaders active in advocacy have gained specialist knowledge in human rights, Australian government systems, media engagement, and United Nations (UN) mechanisms, strengthening their capacity for systems advocacy, political engagement and community-led action. Training has focused on practical application, including the use of UN human rights mechanisms to advance community priorities.





When face-to-face delivery was not possible, the program delivered an eight-part webinar series that attracted more than 500 participants and included sessions on the Genocide Convention, UN human rights mechanisms, and Magnitsky legislation. Speakers included UN Special Rapporteurs, including Francesca Albanese, Professor Ben Saul, Clément Nyaletsossi Voule, Chris Sidoti, and Sir Bill Browder, widely recognised for his work on the Magnitsky Act. Participants applied this learning to issues affecting their communities in Australia and internationally while building relationships with community leaders and advocacy networks that extended beyond the program itself.

Leadership retreats were developed in recognition that community leaders rarely have opportunities to step away from the immediate demands of community work and reflect on their own leadership journeys. Across 10 leadership retreats, CiCT brought together leaders from diverse refugee backgrounds and created spaces for experiential learning, sharing experiences, practical problem-solving, and mutual support. Relationships formed during retreats often continued through collaborative projects, peer mentoring, and community initiatives, strengthening connections between organisations and communities that might otherwise never meet.

The annual [CiCT Forum](#) creates a different kind of opportunity. Refugee communities share stories of strengths, resistance to hardship, leadership, and contribution with one another and with the wider Australian community through presentations, performances, and community conversations. Community members, service providers, government representatives, and policymakers become witnesses to these experiences, creating opportunities for alternative community narratives to emerge.

Looking back over more than 15 years of CiCT, one lesson stands out. Strengths-based settlement begins by recognising the assets refugee communities already possess and creating opportunities for those strengths to grow. Community organisations, leadership, cultural knowledge, and social networks are not simply outcomes of settlement; they are resources that support settlement itself.

CiCT's experience suggests that this approach also contributes to trauma recovery. Refugee-led organisations create opportunities for people to reconnect with one another, to identify shared priorities, and to take action on issues that matter to their communities. Access to specialist expertise, opportunities to build relationships, and spaces where communities can tell their own stories contribute to autonomy, self-efficacy, and a greater sense of agency and control over the future.

Walking alongside communities has meant recognising that refugee communities are active participants in their own settlement journeys. The role of projects such as CiCT is to support communities as they pursue their own aspirations and build on the strengths they already possess.

Mubashar Hasan, PhD works at STARTTS as a senior Project Officer, CiCT. He co-facilitated the inception of a diaspora human rights and training program jointly run by STARTTS and Diplomacy Training Program. He has previously written on foreign interference in refugee communities in Australia. Dr Hasan holds a PhD in politics from Griffith University and won Griffith Business School's 2021 Outstanding International Alumnus.

Jasmina Bajraktarevic-Hayward came to Australia in 1993 as a refugee from Bosnia-Herzegovina. She is a Social Worker (Hon 1, University Medal) and the Community Services Coordinator at STARTTS. Jasmina's involvement in the refugee field dates back to 1991, when she became involved in work with Bosnian refugees in Croatia through "Suncokret-Centre for Grassroots Relief Work", an implementing partner of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Jasmina commenced her work at STARTTS in the position of Counsellor/Project Officer (communities of former Yugoslavia) in 1994 and remained in the position until 1999 when she took on the role of a Team Leader at Singleton Safe Haven. She has been in her current role since 2000. Her knowledge and expertise range from individual trauma counselling, through groupwork and community development to management, staff supervision, not-for-profit governance, policy analysis and development, project management and tender writing.

Jasmina manages a section of STARTTS consisting of 240 staff including Community Development Team, Rural and Regional Community Development Team, Health Promotion Team, LGBTIQ+ Team, Community Development Evaluation Team, Youth Team, School Liaison Team, Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) Team, Witness to War and Violence Project and Mental Health Community Living Supports for Refugees (MH-CLSR) team as well as staff covering policy analysis and input, community cultural development, grant and tender writing and community capacity building. Jasmina has significant Board experience and is currently the President of the Refugee Council of Australia and a member of the NSW Refugee Communities Advocacy Network as well as a former member of the World Pride Sydney Advisory Committee. In the past, she was on Boards of Karitane, NSW Multicultural Youth Affairs Network (MYAN), Immigrant Women's Speakout and Western Sydney Area Health Service.



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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