Evaluating projects using social capital framework in refugee communities in Australia

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Always was Always Will Be, Aboriginal Land

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Country we are on, Larrakia People, their Ancestors, the Elders, past and present; as well as people on whose Country this presentation was created – Darug Nation. As a person with lived refugee experience, I offer my deep gratitude for the connection to the Country I was gifted. I acknowledge the impact of colonial terrorism and trauma on First Nations people as well as their strength and resilience in the face of injustice.





Image sources: - https://www.aboriginalheritage.org/history/clans-of-sydney/ and larrakia-map - Larrakia Nation)

WHO WE ARE

- **STARTTS** stands for the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors
- STARTTS is a specialist, not-for-profit organisation that was established in 1988. It provides culturally relevant psychological treatment and support, and community interventions, to help people and communities heal the scars of torture and refugee trauma and rebuild their lives in Australia. STARTTS also fosters a positive recovery environment through the provision of training to services, advocacy and policy work.

Understanding the Refugee Experience

What might shape the refugee experience?

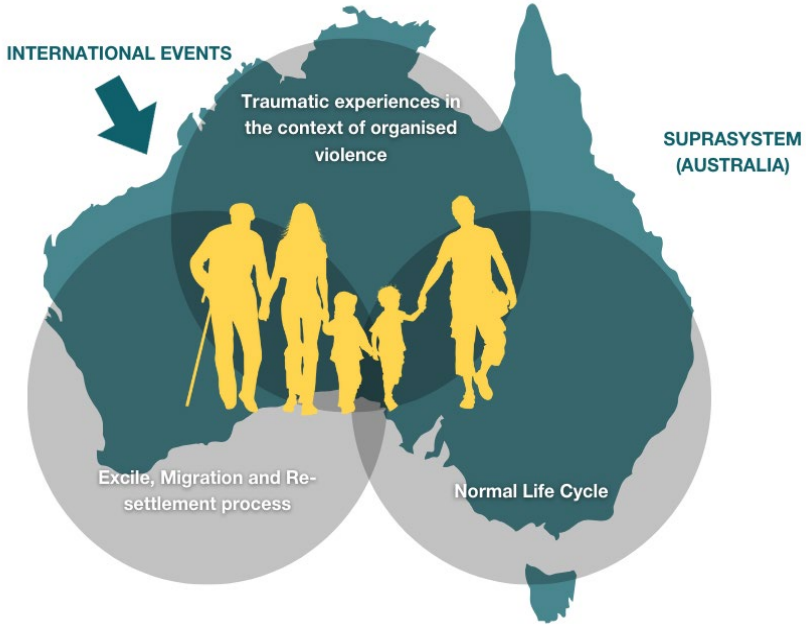
Imagine you have had to leave your home suddenly and rebuild your life in a new country. What challenges might affect your wellbeing, relationships and ability to settle?

Refugee experiences are rarely caused by one factor. They are shaped by multiple experiences and circumstances interacting over time.

Understanding the refugee experience

People from refugee backgrounds may be affected by the interaction of:

- **Past traumatic experiences** — violence, persecution, deprivation, loss and displacement
- **Resettlement challenges** — learning a new language, navigating unfamiliar systems, housing, employment and rebuilding social networks
- **Everyday life challenges** — relationships, family responsibilities, illness, employment, ageing and other life transitions
- **Wider social and political influences** — policies, services and attitudes in Australia, as well as events occurring in countries of origin

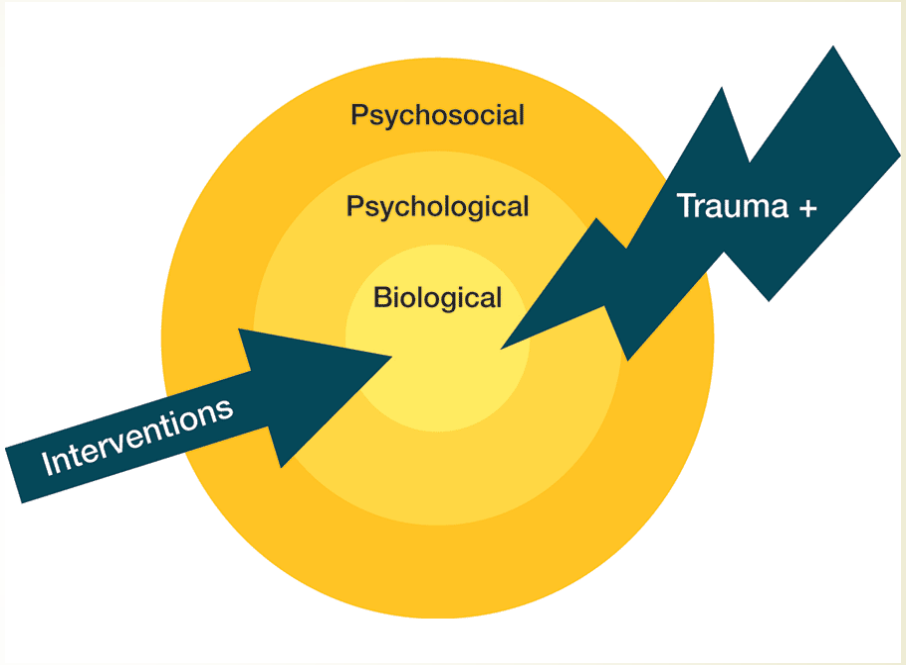


The refugee experience does not end at resettlement. Past experiences interact continuously with present circumstances and future opportunities.

The biopsychosocial impact of refugee trauma

Refugee trauma can affect multiple, interconnected dimensions of life:

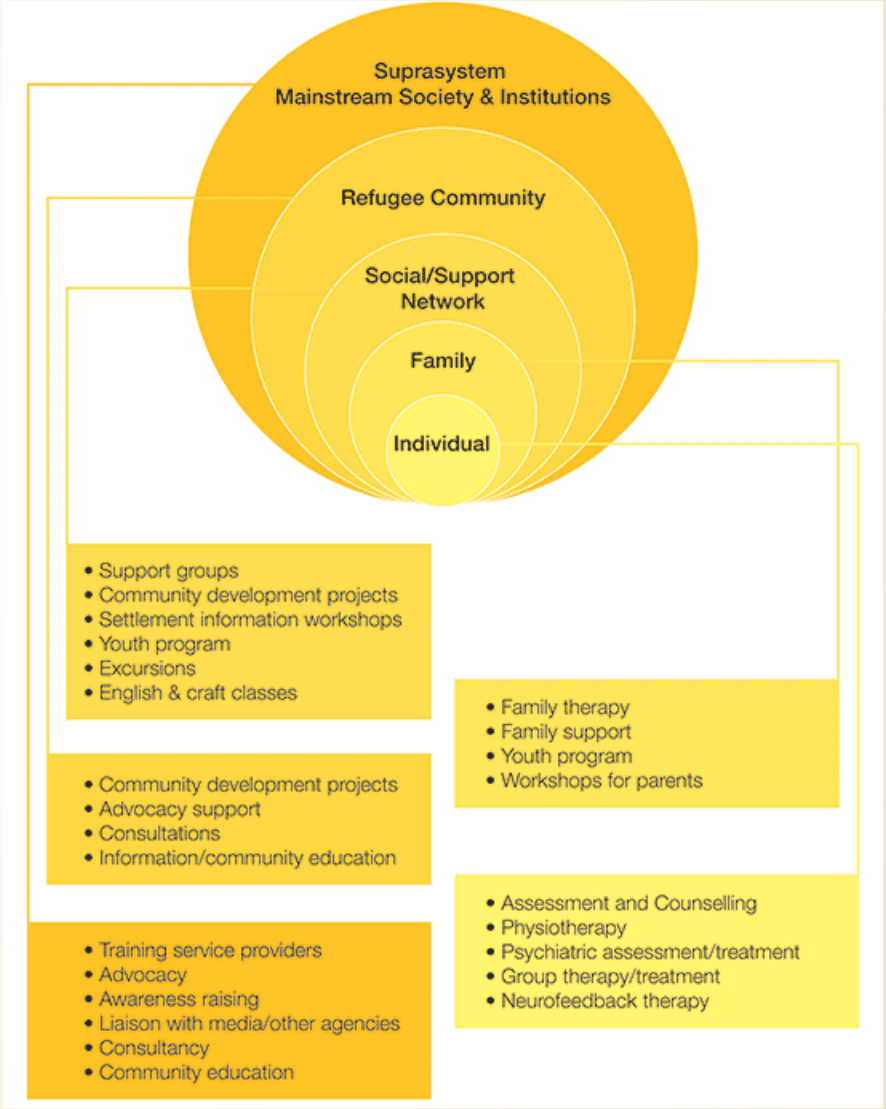
- **Biological** — Physical injury and chronic pain, Sleep and physical health difficulties and Changes to neurological and physiological functioning
- **Psychological** – Fear, anxiety, grief, loss, depression, PTSD and Changes in confidence, identity and sense of safety
- **Social** — Disrupted family and community relationships, loss of trust, isolation and reduced sense of belonging



Trauma affects more than an individual's mental health—it can affect the body, relationships, social networks and capacity to participate in community life.

The refugee does not exist in isolation

STARTTS' systemic approach recognises that an individual lives within their family, social networks, refugee community and the broader Australian society, and that trauma can have impacts across each of these levels.



Core experiences of psychological trauma

Recovery is built through renewed power and connection.

Core experiences

Disempowerment

and

Disconnection

from others

A trauma-informed response therefore has to attend to power, power, agency, relationships and and belonging.

"Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections."

"Recovery can take place only within the context of context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation." isolation."

Herman, Judith. Trauma and Recovery, 1992

Effects of traumatic experiences in the context of organised violence

Trauma can damage relationships, identity and the systems that give life meaning.

Organised violence damages the social world

A refugee trauma lens therefore needs to look beyond individual symptoms.

"Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships."

"They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community." community."

"They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others."

"They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience."

"They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis."

This is why trauma-informed practice must also be relational, cultural and systemic.

Herman, Judith. Trauma and Recovery, 1992

What does this mean for evaluation?

The refugee experience is complex and relational. Evaluation needs to capture how programs influence people's relationships, networks and access to support and opportunities.

Multidimensional refugee experience

Past and present experiences shape wellbeing, relationships and opportunities.

Changes are relational as well as individual

Programs can strengthen relationships, build trust and create new connections.

Programs can rebuild and create opportunities

Through shared activities, learning, support and connection.

Social capital provides a framework to evaluate these changes

It helps us understand how programs strengthen relationships, networks and access to resources.

Key areas of change to explore in evaluation

Relationships

Stronger family, peer and community connections

- New and strengthened friendships
- Greater family cohesion
- Support from people with similar and different backgrounds
- Sense of belonging

Trust

Greater confidence in others, services and institutions

- Increased trust in community
- members and service providers
- Confidence to seek help
- Positive experiences with services
- Feeling safe and respected

Belonging

Stronger sense of inclusion and community connection

- Feeling accepted and valued
- Increased participation in community life
- Cross-cultural understanding
- More opportunities to contribute

Access

Better pathways to information, support, services and opportunities

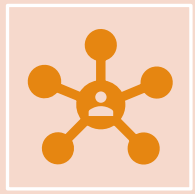
- Awareness of available services
- Confidence navigating systems
- Referrals and ongoing support
- Access to education, employment and other opportunities

Evaluating refugee programs therefore requires us to look beyond individual change and examine what changes in the relationships, networks and systems around people.

What is social capital?



Social capital refers to social relationships, connections, networks and resources that exist within a community, as well as the norms or qualities that govern social interaction, such as trust and cooperation (Rostila 2010).

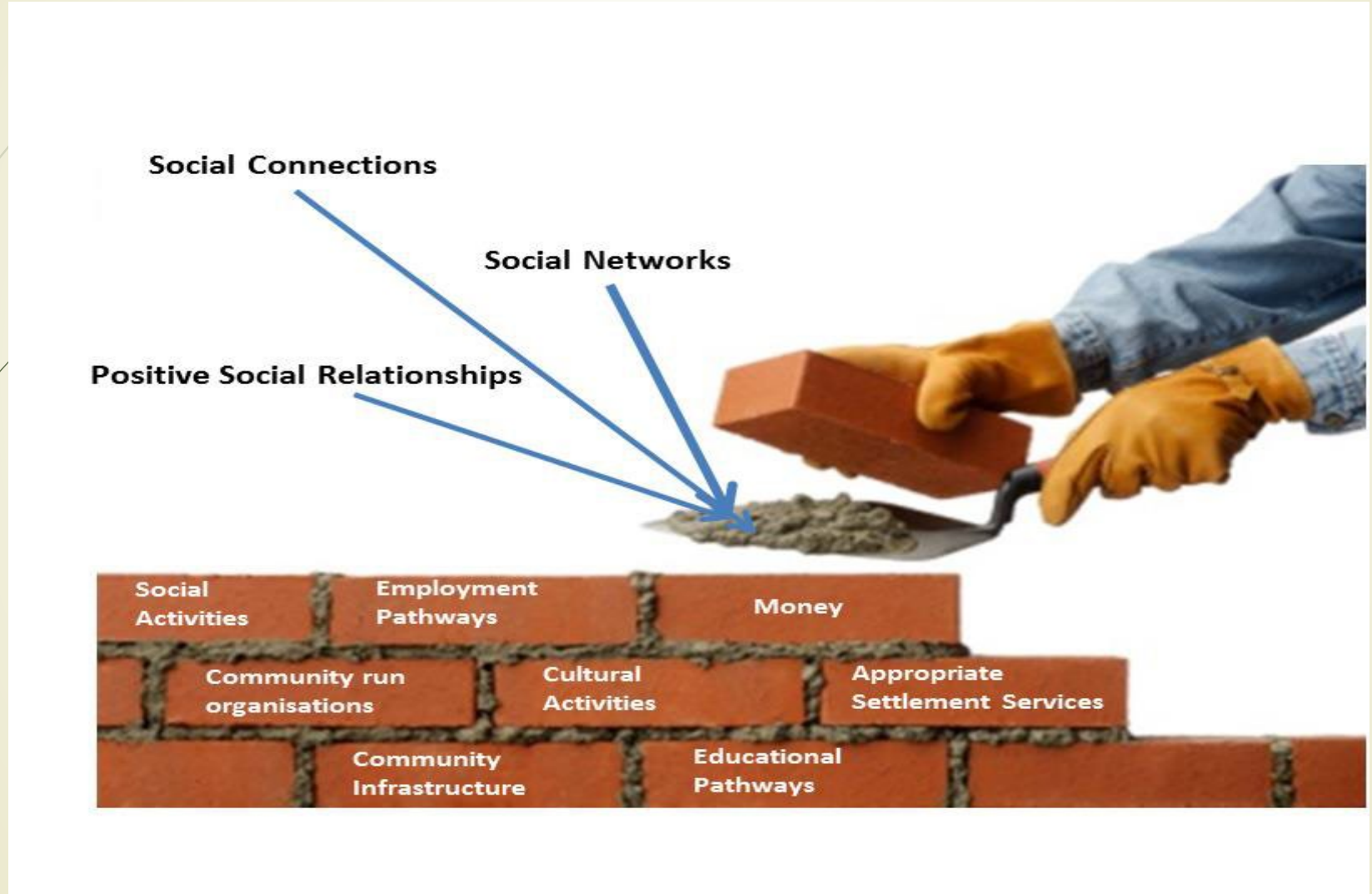


Social capital assists cooperation within and between communities. It is sometimes understood as a collective resources which can increase a community's capacity to address problems together and enhance community wellbeing (Putnam 2000).

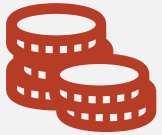
What makes up social capital?

- Social capital refers to **social relationships, connections, networks** and **resources** that exist within a community, as well as the 'norms' or qualities that govern social interaction, such as **trust and cooperation**. Social capital enables cooperation within and between communities.

What is social capital?



Three types of social capital are defined in the literature:



Bonding capital



Bridging capital



Linking capital

What is Bonding capital?



Close social connections to people close to you, like you or in your own social group



They provide social support mechanisms that are essential for ‘getting by’ in life.

Bonding Capital - ‘The Dark Side’

In some cases, excessive Bonding Capital can lead to closed communities and the exclusion of those who are different

In the worst cases, this can lead to extreme discrimination, racism, xenophobia or genocide

What is Bridging Capital?

Horizontal connections to people in the wider community.

Assists individuals and groups to access social and economic resources that aren't available in their own communities.

What is Linking Capital?

Vertical connections to people in positions of authority or working in government or relevant social institutions.

Gives individuals and groups access to opportunities for ‘getting ahead’.

Impacts of the refugee experience on social capital

" Before we arrive we have other issues, history, political differences, and fragmentation. The impacts of those experiences before we come here can have a great influence. When people come here, due to what we went through, people don't trust each other. You don't feel like you want to connect because of bad past experience; fear, maybe - perhaps the people you lived with betrayed you or something." (Consultation participant)

Impacts of the refugee experience on social capital

- Broken social networks and fragmented families
- Dissolution of social bonds due to persecution and trauma
- Deliberate destruction of communities and trust by regimes
- Loss of social structures
- Mistrust and suspicion of outsiders or authorities
- Multiple displacements and disruptions
- Individual and community resilience in the face of adversity

Strengthening Social Capital - A Working Definition

- ‘Supporting individuals and communities to strengthen positive social **relationships**, **connections**, and **networks** which increase their capacities to address problems in common and **enhance wellbeing** through increased access to **social resources’.**

What is STARTTS social capital Framework?

Social Capital Framework in Refugee Communities Settling in Australia was developed through a collaboration between **STARTTS and the UNSW Centre for Refugee Research**.

The project **commenced in 2012**, with refugee community members actively involved in the research process.

The **final report was published in October 2013**.

It explored how **social capital is understood and experienced within refugee communities settling in Australia**.

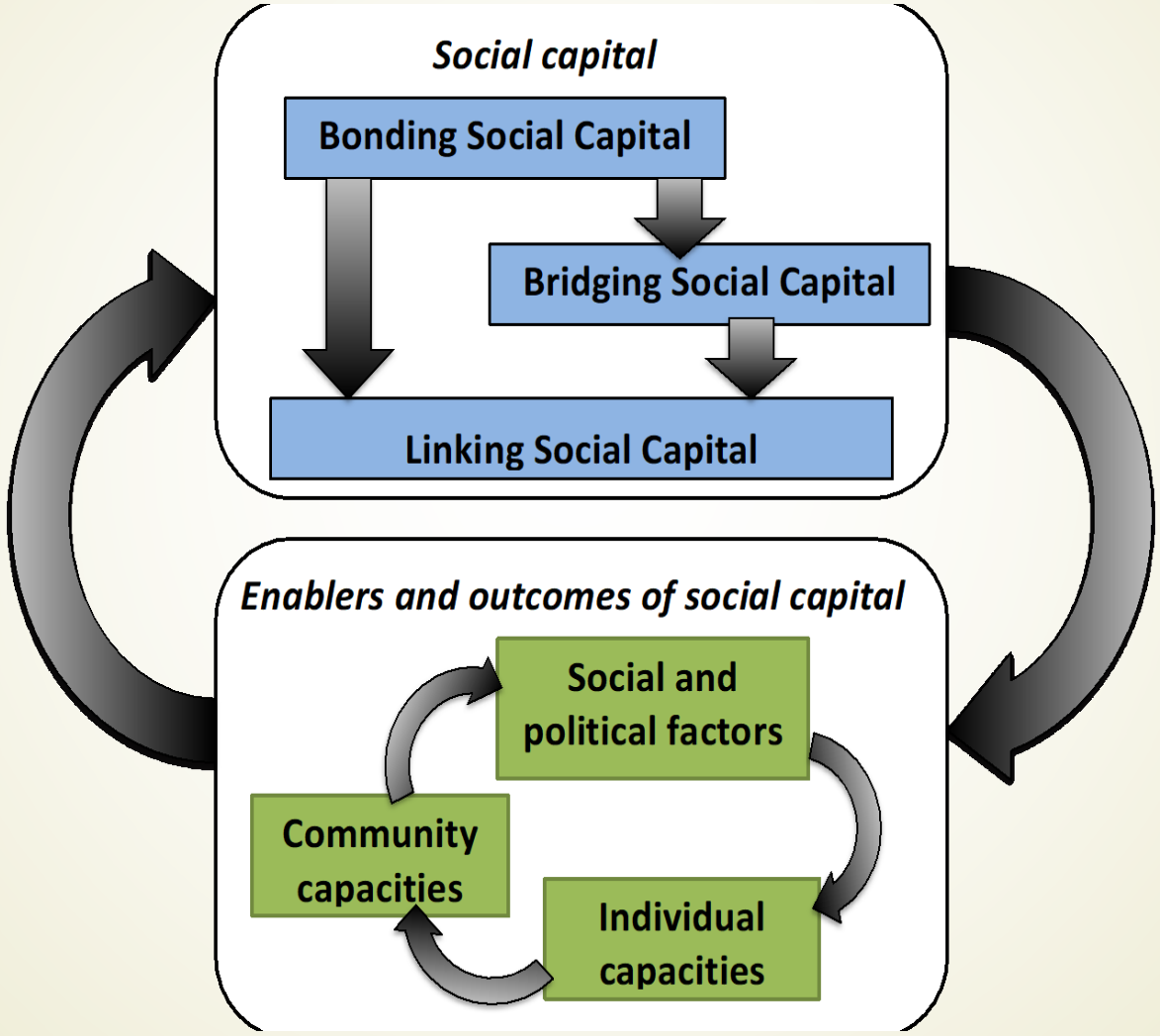
It developed a framework of objectives and indicators for **evaluating social capital outcomes in refugee community development programs**.

A Model of Social Capital in resettlement

The four aspects of social capital:

- Social Connections and Networks
- Relational Norms
- Social Resources
- Social Capital Enablers

Social Capital as a cycle



Example of social capital Framework?



Social Connection and Network (SCN) Objectives and Indicators

These objectives relate to establishing, strengthening or expanding social connections and networks.

SCN Objective 1	Indicators
Improved, Strengthened or Expanded family connections	1.1 Maintaining connections with family and friends overseas using social networking/internet 1.2 Increased access to the support of extended family including through family reunion 1.3 Increased proximity to immediate family (i.e. affordable housing in same area for children) 1.4 Increased understanding of parenting attitudes and norms in Australia 1.5 Increased number of family social activities 1.6 Increased time spent in positive shared family activities
SCN Objective 2	**Indicators**
Established, Strengthened or Expanded links to settlement service providers	2.1 Increased confidence in approaching settlement services 2.2 Increased access to specialist/appropriate settlement services 2.3 Increased sense that services are responsive to individual and community needs 2.4 Established/ Improved relationships with individual staff 2.5 Increased number of positive relationships with individual staff 2.6 Increased trust in individual staff 2.7 Positive relationships with staff members from one's own ethnic/religious community 2.8 Increased trust in staff members from one's own ethnic/religious community

How we use the social capital framework for evaluation?

- Stage 1: Use a participatory approach to design a project
- Stage 2: Setting the project goal, objectives, and activities or aligning the project goal and objectives with social capital framework objectives
- Stage 3: Checking the project's logic (program logic)
- Stage 4: Developing social capital indicators for project goal and objectives
- Stage 5: Designing the evaluation
- Stage 6: Conducting the evaluation

Example of How we use the social capital framework for evaluation?

Application of social capital framework to align program outcomes and indicators with social capital outcomes and indicators:

Program objectives	Social capital objectives	Social capital indicators	Program indicators
Language services: Improve access to information, support, and participation through culturally safe and in-language engagement to ensure language is not a barrier to information.	SCE objective 6: Increased sense of independence and autonomy.	6.3 Increased knowledge of your rights and how to access them.	% program participants reported access to health and wellbeing information and support in their own language. % program participants who have bi-cultural project officer.
Sector capability: Strengthen access to culturally responsive settlement services through community-led and culturally informed support networks.	SCE objective 17: Increased provision of appropriate and responsive settlement services.	17.2 Increased access to culturally appropriate and specialist settlement services. 17.3 Increased sense that services are responsive to individual and community needs.	# program participants reported that their access to culturally appropriate health and wellbeing services increased as result of the program. % program participants who have access to culturally appropriate health and wellbeing services that meet their individual and community needs.
Community resilience: Strengthen community resilience through culturally safe groups, cross-cultural engagement, and stronger links to community support networks.	SCRN objective 1: Increased community goodwill, mutual support and cooperation.	1.1 Increased tangible support received from community members. 1.2 Increased tangible support given to community members. 1.3 Increased voluntary work.	% program participants have link with community groups and support network within their own community. % program participants have link with community groups and support network with other refugee communities.
Settlement: Improve confidence, settlement knowledge, and access to local services and support networks.	SCN objective 2: established, strengthened or expanded links to settlement service providers	2.1 Increased confidence in approaching settlement services. 2.2 Increased access to specialist/appropriate settlement services.	% program participants have confidence in approaching health and wellbeing services.
Shared sense of value: Strengthen cross-cultural connections, social inclusion, and sense of belonging through shared community experiences and relationships across diverse groups.	SCRN objective 5: Increased understanding and acceptance of diversity within the wider community.	5.1 Increased understanding of other communities or social groups. 5.2 Increased acceptance of people or communities who are different to oneself.	# program participants make friendship with other community members. # times program participants received friend request from other community members.

How We Measure

WHO-5, CSQ-8, CSQ-6, NMDS-8, GSES, STARTTS Social Capital Survey, measures of confidence and knowledge

Surveys designed to align with specific project objectives

Measure of change on specific indicators (Settlement)

STARTTS Social Capital Indicators

Interviews, focus groups – Most Significant Change and Attribution Questions

Observation

Arts-based methods

What We Found

- Consistent improvements across programs:
- Connection
- Safety
- Participation
- Identity
- Confidence
- Knowledge

Walk On Walk Strong (2021–2023)

A peer-led LGBTQIA+ refugee program with lived-experience governance, combining groupwork, counselling, capacity building, training and resource development.

OUR APPROACH

Peer-led
Lived-experience governance

Support & Healing
Groupwork and counselling

Capacity Building
Training and skill development

Knowledge
Resource development

Community Connection
Belonging and peer networks

MEASURES AND DATA SOURCES

WHO-5 Wellbeing Scale (pre/post)

STARTTS Social Capital Indicators (connection, belonging, trust)

Qualitative Interviews + Focus Groups

Session Feedback + Facilitator Observation

Training Evaluation (Knowledge and Confidence)

KEY OUTCOMES

Significant increases in all elements of social capital and leadership

Strengthened peer networks (bonding capital)

Improvements in wellbeing (WHO-5) observed across cohorts

Increased confidence and knowledge

144 trainings and 1,222 participants – significant increase in confidence and knowledge

Evidence of healing through connection, safety, participation and empowerment.

Hayat Amina

Trauma-informed community program

Program Overview

- 6-week trauma-informed group program
- Focus: addressing sexual violence
- Co-designed with bicultural community ambassadors

Delivered via:

- Discussion
- Storytelling
- Embodied practices

Data Collection

- WHO-5 wellbeing (pre/post)
- CSQ-6 satisfaction (post)
- Knowledge & confidence
- Social capital indicators
- Interviews & focus groups

Key Outcomes

↑22% Improvement in Wellbeing

- Stronger trust & peer connection within groups
- Increased knowledge of violence, & support pathways
- Greater confidence to respond & seek help (**self-efficacy**)

Key Outcomes

- Stronger trust & peer connection within groups
- Improved access to services
- Greater confidence to respond & seek help (self-efficacy)

All One Under the Sun

Project Description:

- Multi-year (2021–2024), youth-led anti-racism initiative; Arts-based engagement + leadership development;
- Multi-community collaboration, consortium model

Data collection

- Qualitative interviews, focus groups
- Observational data
- Audience survey
- **Social Capital indicators** (bonding, bridging, linking)
- **Audience survey**
- **Social Capital indicators** (bonding, bridging, linking)
- Participation + reach metrics

KEY OUTCOMES

- **800+ direct participants** and ~20,000 community reach (events and online)
- **Expansion of bridging and linking social capital**
- Increased sense of belonging, identity formation, leadership and agency
- Participants transitioned into leadership and community roles

Q&A

