

*The Communities in Cultural Transition (CiCT) program has grown from a simple one-person job to a project led by an expanded team encompassing students and volunteers. DAVID AJAK AJANG looks back at its beginnings and his involvement in the project.*

# Communities in Cultural Transition Program



**C**iCT assists non funded community organisations formed by members of newly arrived small and emerging communities to build their capacity and leadership. The program uses a strengths-based approach and seeks to build on existing capacities and strengths of the community groups it assists. This program occupies a significant space within STARTTS Community Services Team and indeed within STARTTS as a whole.

I was one of the first South Sudanese refugees to settle in Australia between 1998 and 2003. This was before the South Sudanese, Sudanese, and other Africans started to arrive in large numbers around 2004.

In my community, I was hurled into an informal leadership volunteer role to help my countrymen and women settle smoothly in Australia before I had any paid position in the sector. I had no local Australian experience and no relevant education in those early years. Still, I had had a tough life as a refugee, which had given me a strong sense of purpose fuelled by a passion for social justice. I was hungry for knowledge. I wanted to know more about Australia and the world and to do more for refugees in general and my South Sudanese people in particular. I cared deeply about empowering people who were powerless, regardless of who they may have been, regardless of their backgrounds.

Nothing is as authentic as someone's life story. I told my story and my community's story. I knew a lot about my community. I shared what I had lived through, things I had experienced, and events I had witnessed. I wanted to educate individuals and services to respond with a better understanding of newly-arrived refugee communities, especially my community.

My priority was that refugees must be respected, because I knew from my experience that to be powerless and disrespected by others is dehumanising. I wanted to be accepted as a resourceful, enterprising,

honest, and knowledgeable advocate for my community. On occasions when working as a community volunteer with mainstream and other service providers, I sensed disrespect, I just walked out of those meetings.

As the CiCT project officer now, I cherish listening to hundreds of community leaders and volunteers, learning about what matters in their particular communities and groups as they advocate for their settlement and the social development of their communities as I once did. In Africa, we say, if you are on a journey, the people you meet on the way become part of the journey. CiCT has become an integral part of the settlement and social development journey of a number of refugee communities.

The culture we have built at STARTTS genuinely enables the perception of refugee communities as people with capacities which can be supported and enhanced for the benefit of their settlement and community as well as social development.

The CiCT program is an acknowledgment that no individual community development worker has the capacity to respond to the needs of communities. CiCT uses a pool of consultants to respond to the needs of refugee communities and pays these consultants a small brokerage fee. CiCT also has a considerable pool of volunteer consultants that support its work.

We have worked with over 150 refugee community associations and groups since the program started more than ten years ago. In that time, the program has assisted with skills development in areas such as conflict resolution, events management, leadership and governance, project planning, submission writing, marketing, health promotion, financial systems, graphic design, legal advice for incorporated association and advocacy.

The CiCT program is a resource that refugee communities tap into during their settlement and community development.

Refugee community leaders and representatives

## **Nothing is as authentic as someone's life story.**



of groups reach out to us at STARTTS. Many STARTTS staff members have extended networks in various refugee communities developed over years of partnerships and collaborative initiatives. This request is forwarded to me, followed by a detailed assessment of the group's needs and strengths. I then match the group with the most appropriate consultant. This engagement is only possible because of the deep-seated trust that individuals at STARTTS have built with refugee communities over the years.

CiCT acknowledges refugee community leaders and representatives are well-positioned to assess their own needs for support as they have grappled first hand with the issues and the services available. Leaders educate us on what matters in their own community right now and how they would like to

be supported to either maintain or bring about needed changes in their communities.

In addition to building capacity community by community, CiCT has extended its activities to include annual forums and training courses for targeted groups.

CiCT held three very successful, high profile forums in 2017, 2018, and 2019 which were attended by 180, 230, and 280 people, respectively. The forums brought together people from refugee community organisations, the health sector, government, and the community services sector. In addition, it also created opportunities for the newly arrived refugees and established migrants to connect and develop relationships between and among their communities. It is these relationships and friendships that have



led to different communities and groups creating lasting connections. For example, as a result of the relationships forged at the forum, various religious groups have started visiting each other's places of worship.

The forums also created opportunities for mainstream services to connect and mingle with refugee communities. This has enabled them to access more services.

Besides the forums CiCT ran a very successful leadership training program for representatives of refugee communities in 2019 in partnership with Western Sydney University. To the best of our knowledge this was the first leadership course specifically for refugee community representatives held in Australia. The course was unique because it

was targeted at an advanced leadership training course that was held in 2020.

In addition, CiCT has delivered several tailored leadership training programs for specific refugee groups.

Over the years the CiCT program has evolved and extended far beyond its initial remit and is now considered a flagship program at STARTTS.

With increased funding from STARTTS, I would like to see the CiCT program continue to innovate as the demographics of refugees in Australia change. CiCT can incorporate new learnings, address new challenges and provide new services. One way would be for CiCT to extend its services by assisting refugee communities settled in regional towns, instead of concentrating almost solely in Sydney. ☺