



# Equity Catalysts Community of Practice Co-Design Process and Challenges

Reem Assil for Migration Exchange, October 2024

## About Migration Exchange

Migration Exchange (MEX) is a UK-based charitable programme whose mission is to cultivate insight, connection and action across the UK migration and refugee field, working together with civil society to achieve positive change. We focus particularly on independent funders and charities to achieve this mission, connecting people through convening, events and a funder network. As well as commissioning research and analysis on trends and patterns, we develop and co-design responses to shared challenges and opportunities.

## About Reem Assil

Reem Assil is a Master Facilitator with over 800 hours of global experience, designing and managing leadership programmes in English, French, and Arabic. A certified Transformational Coach and mentor for over 15 years. Reem pursued a PhD in Immunology at Université Montpellier II and a second PhD in Religious Studies and Peacebuilding at the University of Winchester. Her previous roles include Chief Biomedical Technician at the University of Cambridge and Programmes Director at Common Purpose. She holds a certificate in Business and Social Justice from the University of Cambridge/ Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), a certificate in Embodied Conflict Resolution, a certificate in Working With Somatic Wounds, a certificate in Integrative Somatic Trauma Therapy and is currently pursuing a certificate in Mind-Body Coaching.

“I am thrilled to collaborate with MEX in delivering the Community of Practice on leadership development. This partnership holds great importance as it aligns with my belief in the power of collective efforts to reimagine accessible and equitable leadership opportunities within the refugee and migration sector. Upholding the principles of co-design and respecting the dignity of all participants is paramount to me. Through this endeavour, we aim to foster social and transformational justice. I am genuinely excited to contribute to the creation of safe spaces where the community can collaboratively shape the future of leadership in the refugee and migration sector.”

## Introduction

This report presents the findings, processes, and recommendations from the Equity Catalysts Community of Practice (CoP), an initiative led by Reem Assil in collaboration with Migration Exchange (MEX) from September 2023 - August 2024. Reem, a highly experienced facilitator and leadership coach, spearheaded this work to address leadership challenges within the refugee and migration sector. The Equity Catalysts CoP was co-designed with participants and focused on creating an inclusive space for leaders to explore equity, power dynamics, and leadership development.

This report is intended for MEX, its stakeholders, including funders and organisations working in the migration sector. It highlights the collective learning, key themes, and challenges encountered throughout the CoP journey. Additionally, the report provides recommendations aimed at fostering equitable leadership practices and supporting long-term transformation within the sector.

## Background and Setting Up the Community of Practice

Migration Exchange (MEX) has long engaged with the refugee and migration sector, focusing on leadership development. Through research and collaboration with various stakeholders, MEX identified a clear need for a strategic approach to leadership development in the sector, particularly one that provides space for leaders to connect with peers, share learning, and access mutual support. This was highlighted in our 2022 [report](#). An understanding of this need laid the foundation for the Equity Catalysts Community of Practice. The Equity Catalysts Community of Practice aimed to bring together different stakeholders across the UK who have an interest in leadership for change. The CoP aimed to nurture existing connections and generate new ones. It will explore how leadership development opportunities in the refugee and migration sector can be more accessible, equitable and contribute to system change.

## Executive Summary

Reem Assil led the design and facilitation of the Equity Catalysts Community of Practice (CoP) in partnership with Migration Exchange. This initiative, co-designed with participants, aimed to promote accessible and equitable leadership in the refugee and migration sector. The CoP's sessions, held from January to June 2024, focused on key issues such as anti-racism, lived experience leadership, and power dynamics. Participants engaged in reflective discussions and peer coaching, using real-world scenarios to explore leadership challenges.

The CoP highlighted the importance of collective power, challenging entrenched systems, and understanding the impact of intersectionality on leadership. Despite challenges with participation and online learning formats, the CoP fostered a supportive, anti-oppressive space for learning and growth. Participants expressed a strong desire for continued engagement and further skill development, particularly for senior leaders, to embed equitable practices across organisations.

The report outlines key recommendations, including establishing a cooperative learning hub, funding wellbeing grants for leaders, and developing anti-oppressive organisational models. Participants also called for the CoP's continuation and expansion to deepen learning and drive systemic change within the sector. Reem Assil's leadership has been pivotal in advancing these efforts.

## **Co-Design Process and Key Challenges**


The Equity Catalysts Community of Practice was built through a four-phase co-design process, ensuring participant involvement in shaping the community to address leadership challenges in the sector. This participatory model was key to creating an inclusive space for leaders, particularly those with lived experience of the refugee and migration system.

The co-design process focused on gathering insights through surveys and focus groups, which highlighted the need for flexible participation, themed discussions, and a focus on equitable leadership and power dynamics. However, challenges emerged, such as balancing participant expectations and navigating the logistics of diverse learning styles in an online format. Additionally, centering anti-oppressive practices added complexity but was integral to the CoP's approach.

## **About the sessions**

From January to June 2024, six core sessions formed the heart of the CoP, each session addressing vital themes like anti-racism, representation, access to senior positions and lived experience leadership. The themes were chosen by the community members during the co-design phase. These sessions followed a structured approach, blending plenary discussions on real-world challenges with peer coaching in smaller groups. The GROW coaching model was employed to guide personal and professional development, fostering meaningful dialogue and practical solutions.

Participants found value in the sessions' emphasis on real-life scenarios, peer-to-peer support, and structured coaching, contributing to transformative learning experiences.



The final session, held in-person in London, allowed for reflection on individual and collective growth, celebrating the CoP's progress. This session was a celebration of the community's growth and a powerful space for participants to reflect on their personal journeys and the collective impact of the CoP. It also provided an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the CoP and discuss ways to sustain and build upon the work moving forward.

The CoP members received a monthly newsletter with a recap of the previous session and resources (reading, watching, listening materials) to prepare for the next session.

*"I attended the first session of Equity Catalysts, facilitated by Reem Assil, and it was incredibly inspiring. The ground rules and coaching models were presented so clearly. I'm excited to be part of a community working towards greater equity in the migration sector. The GROW model is simple and accessible, a powerful tool for personal and professional growth."*  
– Pascale Gayford

*"I was part of such an amazing and challenging conversation this week about anti-racism. It is challenging to be honest and vulnerable. It takes daily checks to unpack my internalised racism, and understanding my privileges helps me to recognise micro-aggressions and structural discrimination. Thank you to Reem Assil and Migration Exchange (MEX) for creating the Equity Catalysts community. I'm excited to use the GROW model again and to cultivate the values of this space!"*  
– Lisa Wagenknecht, Community Development Officer at Scottish Refugee Council

*"Thanks for a really valuable session just now – the discussions and peer coaching space were much appreciated, and I've come away feeling energised and clear on my plan – and a bit more confident in my ability – for the challenge I brought. In terms of my overall reflection following today – I feel like you are enabling/we together are building a safe and kind space to explore our roles in building greater equity in the refugee and asylum space."*  
– Poppy Thomas, Networks Manager, Lloyds Bank Foundation

## Key themes

Throughout the Equity Catalysts Community of Practice, some recurring key themes continued to emerge from the conversations and the reflections on power, positionality, and leadership within the Refugee and Migration sector including:

1. **Awareness and Reflection on Power:** Many participants, highlighted their increasing awareness of the power they hold and the need to challenge the status quo. Several members expressed a newfound realisation that their voices and expertise matter, with one of them noting the importance of daily awareness of how power is used and the courage to challenge it.
2. **Challenging Power and Systems:** Some participants reflected on the importance of strategically challenging power, both within themselves and the systems they operate in. One of them emphasised the need to remove ego and engage in spaces where one can be challenged, while the other connected her personal struggle with systemic oppression and how it affects participation and decision-making.
3. **Intersectionality and Identity in Power:** Many participants reflected on how their intersecting identities affect their relationship with power. One participant discussed how one can be both oppressed and oppressive at the same time, while another two focused on the added complexity and burden of power for racialised and gendered identities. One participant noted the importance of acknowledging lived experience in non-exploitative ways, avoiding tokenism.
4. **Collective Power and Agency:** Several participants spoke about the importance of collective power and the need for solidarity. One participant emphasised that true power lies in the collective, while another found reassurance in knowing she wasn't alone in her struggles and highlighted the value of slowing down to reflect.
5. **Urgency vs. Reflection:** A recurring theme was the tension between urgency and the need for reflection. Community members reflected on the fast pace of the sector and how it hampers the culture of learning and unlearning. My encouragement to "learn, unlearn, and relearn" resonated with many as a way to slow down and challenge dominant power structures.
6. **Navigating Power in Leadership:** Community members reflected on the challenges of navigating power as Black women in leadership roles. One participant's journey from PA to CEO was driven by the desire for power to make meaningful change, while another discussed the exhaustion and burden of holding power in a sector where racialised identities are constantly challenged.

Together, these reflections highlight a collective journey toward understanding and challenging power, with an emphasis on reflection, identity, collective agency, and navigating the complexities of leadership in an inequitable system.

In conclusion, the Community of Practice sessions were designed to be not only learning experiences but also anti-oppressive transformative spaces where participants could challenge themselves, share vulnerabilities, and co-create pathways to a more equitable refugee and migration sector.

The combination of structured peer coaching and open dialogue on real-world issues proved to be an impactful approach, as reflected in the powerful testimonials from community members.

## Final evaluation

Eleven responses were gathered, they suggest a strong desire for continued engagement and development within the Equity Catalysts Community of Practice. Key themes include:

- **Continued Connection:** Many participants expressed a desire to stay connected after the sessions, through ongoing discussion forums, regular events, or collaborative activities across the refugee and migration sector.
- **Further Development:** There is a demand for more skill development, particularly around lived experience, and for additional training with senior management in the sector.
- **Practical Application:** Participants value real-life scenarios and action-oriented learning, with suggestions for smaller, focused action learning sets to enable collaboration among similar-sized organisations.
- **Expanded Sessions:** Requests for more sessions and greater representation across different roles in the sector were also noted.

## Testimonials


*"I have enjoyed being part of Equity Catalysts and honest, courageous and enlightening conversations. As a lived experience leader, I improved confidence and in depth understanding of how power resonates and takes shape in various important themes including opportunity, anti-racism, recognition and understanding lived experience".*

*- Yusuf Ciftci - Refugee Council*

*"It was a privilege to participate in the CoP and share learning with people from different backgrounds and from different organisations. Whilst we all have similar challenges, our approaches to dealing with them differ, and it was invaluable to make those connections and share our lived experiences".*

*- Mufedah Bustin - Hibiscus Initiatives*

*"I was struck by the level of vulnerability and honesty that the participants showed while sharing deep insights, reflections, and visions for the future. I'm grateful that you led by example at the start of the session which set the tone for the remaining time we had together.*



*What felt unusual about the EC journey is the fact that it truly centred co-designed from start to finish, which comes with its own challenges considering limited capacity and difficulties when it comes to engaging everyone more closely, but it is also a participatory approach that made the experience more equitable and generative in terms of learning.”*

*- Farah Al-Haddad - Justice Together Initiative*


## Practical Considerations, reflections and lesson learned

One of the significant challenges faced in the Equity Catalysts Community of Practice was participant retention. While it was essential for the CoP to remain anti-oppressive in its design and execution, I observed a recurring pattern where individuals, despite accepting calendar invites, struggled to attend sessions consistently. Many last-minute apologies revealed that participants were often pulled into other meetings or faced urgent work requirements. This suggests that, in many cases, their time dedicated to the CoP was not protected or prioritised by their senior managers. This issue is symptomatic of a deeper challenge within the refugee and migration sector, where leaders are frequently engaged in firefighting tasks, responding to immediate crises, leaving little room for long-term reflection and development.

Furthermore, co-designing and fostering anti-oppressive practices in leadership development remain relatively new concepts for this sector. Many participants are still accustomed to traditional, hierarchical approaches, where they are spoon-fed instructions rather than actively participating in the creation of knowledge and practice. Dismantling these inequitable and often traumatic leadership approaches takes time. Prolonged, flexible spaces that allow for gradual learning, unlearning, and the building of equitable practices are vital for this transformation.

The need for senior leadership buy-in is crucial to protecting participants' time and ensuring that they can fully engage in these critical spaces. This, combined with a commitment to a more flexible and inclusive approach, will be key to fostering sustained participation and ultimately creating lasting change in leadership practices within the sector.

For lasting systemic change, it is vital to have senior management directly involved in anti-oppressive leadership development. Participants noted the need for more representation from senior leaders to ensure that the values and practices cultivated in the CoP are embedded at all organisational levels.





## Recommendations

Based on my observations while designing and facilitating the Equity Catalysts Community of Practice, along with insights from other engagements in the Refugee and Migration sector—such as the “Reclaiming Lived Experience Leadership Conference” and coaching organisations and individuals—I’ve identified a critical need for structural shifts that challenge dominant power dynamics and foster long-term transformation in leadership. Feedback and reflections from Equity Catalysts members during various sessions further underscore this necessity. From the rich discussions and insights shared throughout the CoP, here are several key ideas for consideration:

### **1. Create a Learning Cooperative**

Establish a cooperative learning hub that operates as an alternative, anti-oppressive educational space. This hub could offer flexible, community-driven leadership training that breaks away from traditional hierarchies and academic models. It would provide trauma-informed, intersectional leadership training, emphasise peer-to-peer learning, and integrate somatic, embodied practices with practical leadership tools, addressing both systemic oppression and individual healing.

### **2. Fund Flexible Wellbeing and Care Grants for Leaders**

Recognising that leadership in the refugee and migration sector often leads to burnout, funders could provide ongoing, flexible grants for the personal wellbeing of CoP participants. These wellbeing grants would cover mental health support, self-care initiatives, and collective rest retreats, allowing leaders to recharge and continue their work sustainably. This would be a direct investment in the holistic health of those advocating for equity, ensuring they have the capacity to continue this vital work.

### **3. Support the Development of Anti-Oppressive Organisational Blueprints**

Support the development of customisable, anti-oppressive organisational blueprints for refugee and migration organisations. These blueprints would be co-created by leaders in the sector and include frameworks for dismantling power hierarchies, integrating lived experience leadership, and embedding equity into governance structures. Funders could provide resources to pilot these blueprints within organisations, offering a replicable, radical model for sector-wide transformation.



#### **4. Fund a "Leadership Accountability Council"**

Establish a community-led accountability body, composed of CoP members and lived experience leaders, tasked with holding organisations accountable to the anti-oppressive principles they commit to. This council would have the power to audit, evaluate, and recommend changes in leadership practices across the sector, ensuring that commitments to equity are upheld over time. Funders could provide the financial backing for this council's operational costs, ensuring it remains independent and impactful. These funding proposals push beyond traditional leadership programmes, aiming to radically restructure how leadership is developed and practiced in the refugee and migration sector. They prioritise equity, challenge power, and centre those most affected by systemic injustice.

#### **5. Continuation and Expansion of the Equity Catalysts Community of Practice**

Participants overwhelmingly expressed the need for a second round of the Equity Catalysts CoP, with many advocating for broader involvement across their organisations. They highlighted the significant benefits that additional colleagues and team members would gain from engaging with the CoP's four core themes. Importantly, they emphasised the value of having safe, reflective spaces to connect these themes to their everyday work and organisational practices.

Furthermore, participants strongly recommended continuing the CoP for current members, to build on the momentum and explore new, relevant themes that were beyond the initial scope. Expanding and sustaining this CoP would not only deepen individual and organisational learning but also drive systemic change in the refugee and migration sector by fostering inclusive leadership and challenging entrenched power dynamics.

## **Glossary terms**

- **Anti-oppressive:** An approach that actively challenges and addresses systemic power imbalances, discrimination, and inequalities to promote fairness and justice in social structures and relationships.
- **Intersectionality:** A framework that examines how different aspects of a person's identity (e.g., race, gender, class) intersect and compound to shape their experiences of privilege or oppression.
- **Co-production:** A collaborative process where service providers and service users work together equally in designing, developing, and delivering services, ensuring that those affected by decisions have a say in them.
- **Community of Practice:** A group of individuals who share a common interest or profession and come together regularly to share knowledge, learn from each other, and improve their practice through ongoing interaction and collaboration.