

# Growing Peace with [Kulika Uganda](#)

Presentation to the RIELA Spring School 2025 'May Peace Prevail'

## Esa's introduction:

*Both Viv and Avril describe themselves as self-funded independent volunteers - although they have a variety of affiliations as you can see from their bios, these are incidental to their work with Kulika which is the focus of this presentation.*

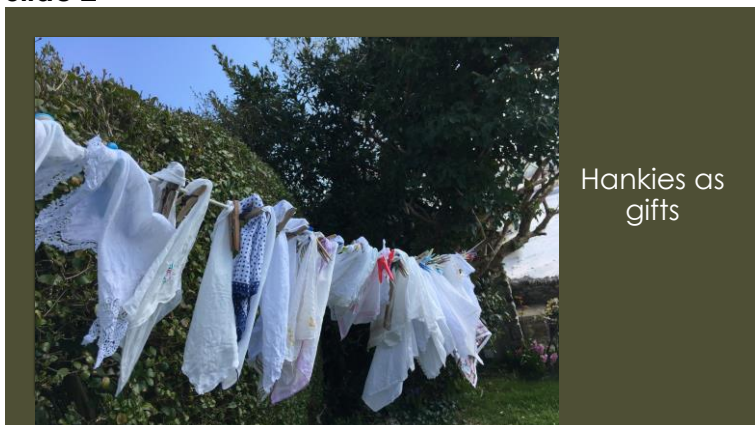
## Slide 1

### Growing Peace Avril Bellinger and Viv Horton

May Peace Prevail  
RIELA Spring School 2025

**Viv** Thank you Esa for that warm welcome, I'm Viv, (I'm Avril) and we really appreciate your interest and for this opportunity to reflect critically on our work. We will tell you more about us as the session unfolds and would welcome questions and conversations throughout the wonderful Spring School. We will begin by exploring the nature of the gift economy and the strengths approach and have brought gifts for you if you care to accept them. We will share some background information about Uganda and about Kulika's work to grow peace in mixed communities: work that aligns with what Hyab Yohannes calls '*restorative integration...a decolonial process of re-building the unfinished project of humanity that was interrupted by colonisation and colonality*'. We show how the organisation preserves its values and practice of promoting ecological organic agriculture in an international funding environment based on money rather than wellbeing. We end with some tentative conclusions about our activities which are work in progress ... and of course ... with seeds.

## Slide 2



**Av:** We begin with Hankies which you can see blowing on my washing line and lovingly ironed by Viv. When we were young, cloth hankies were commonly used as gifts. They are very English, historical and carriers of culture, used as tokens and in Shakespeare's Othello, Desdemona's inability to produce the handkerchief sealed her death warrant. In our increasingly consumerist society, prioritising hygiene has acted as a lever to normalise the disposable instead of the sustainable.

Before we come to the hankies though, we will explain how gifts we have been given have driven our life courses and our work.

**Viv:** I hope you won't think my choice frivolous in this context. The gift I'd like to speak about is sport. I received it from my parents and it has been, and still is, a very important part of my way of being.

I think gifts have enduring value when they are not simply consumed but demand engagement and commitment. Individual and team participation in a wide variety of sports has maintained my physical and mental health and brought challenge, achievement and reward even at the most difficult times.

Inessential yet universal, sport is found in all cultures throughout history, underpinning individual, national and international relationships that can transcend political divisions.

Inevitably, for most of us, much of life must be dedicated to the serious demands of 'death avoidance'; by contrast, sport is both intrinsically absurd, and thoroughly life-enhancing!

Albert Camus said 'All that I know most surely about morality and obligations, I owe to football'. I have passed my parents precious gift to my children and grandchildren.

**Av:** I have always had a lot of self-doubt - high social anxiety which means I'm apt to think my ideas are not worth following up. I have been given the gift of **encouragement** - individuals who, at critical moments, have affirmed my ideas and literally given me the courage to follow through with action (sometimes in spite of myself!). An example of this is the NGO Students and Refugees Together (START) which I founded in Plymouth 24 years ago to support refugees and to provide placement experience for students on professional programmes. You can read about the literally life-changing consequences of that gift of encouragement in our book 'The Strengths Approach in Practice: How it changes lives', but briefly, these are the principles that inform all my practice.

### Slide 3

#### Strengths Approach Principles

- All situations are rich with resources
- People and the environment have the capacity for change and transformation.
- Everyone's contribution is valued and needed
- Difficulties, however severe, can also be a source of resilience and creativity.
- We cannot know the potential of others and so must not place limits on their aspirations

I know that

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In other words, there is always something we can and are obliged to do to promote wellbeing. As Robin Wall Kimmerer says 'All flourishing is mutual'.

#### Slide 4



**Viv:** The relationship with Kulika began informally – I was in Kampala Uganda supporting students from University of Plymouth on their practice placements, which was not a full-time occupation. I had met the then CEO of Kulika Uganda in the UK and went to head office to ask him if there was anything I could do as a volunteer. He was welcoming and pleasant and immediately passed me on to Magdalene, the Community Development Coordinator. She could not have been cooler. Without actually saying, oh no, not another white woman do-gooder, the message was clear. Initially she gave me small basic jobs and we just talked about her role and challenges and, acutely aware of our colonial history, where I could, I helped. Slowly trust and mutual understanding grew. Our long-term relationship with Kulika has always been non-specific. We have asked what they want from us and shared what we think we can bring - learning together all the way through. Preparing this session has been a great opportunity to explore what we think we're doing there so thank you for this moment of reflection.

#### Slide 5



**Av** These hankies are gifts for you. For the next 5 minutes, please pick them up and choose one or two which you can keep and may use later as a wrapper. As you do, please talk to each other about gifts, not only physical objects - and reflect on those that have carried strong meaning for you.

Thank you for taking part. Any brief comments about that exercise? We hope it has set the scene for an understanding of the distinction between the gift economy in contrast to the extractive necro capitalist economy. There are significant processes in the giving and receiving of gifts which are very different from the transactional emptiness of buying and selling. Lewis Hyde writes: **'It is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling bond between two people'**. Gifts must be accepted to allow them to change us, as Lewis Hyde says, **'to awaken a part of the soul'**. In my own case, in accepting the encouragement I then had to follow up on my ideas and do what I could. Acceptance carries a commitment - not to pay back but to cherish the gift and to pay it forward. This session could be seen as an example of us doing that. As Robin Wall Kimmerer says, **'That is the fundamental nature of gifts: they move and their value increases with their passage'**

## Slide 6

### Words matter: Work or moral ambition

To refuse to participate in the shaping of our future is to give it up. Do not be misled into passivity either by false security (they don't mean me) or by despair (there's nothing we can do).

**Each of us must find our work and do it.**

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 1984:141

**Av** Before we go on, we want to acknowledge different uses of the word 'work' because Lewis Hyde in his book 'The Gift' uses 'labour' to refer to the activity within the gift economy. This doesn't sit well with us and so want to clarify that unless we signal, we are talking about the Audre Lorde meaning of our life's work or what Rutger Bregman calls moral ambition. Throughout our careers we have both encountered boundaries that enclose what we can do - nursing, social work, volunteering, academia. What draws us back to Kulika Uganda is a search for freedom to build relationships in which

'All flourishing is mutual' (Kimmerer). The gift economy is core to Kulika's mission in their training of Key Farmer Trainers who practice Ecological Organic Agriculture on their own farms and pass on their knowledge through Farmer to Farmer Extension.

In this workshop we aim to show the long-term efficacy of the strengths approach and gift economy, highlighting best practice in West Nile, an area of refugee settlement and environmental degradation.

## Slide 7

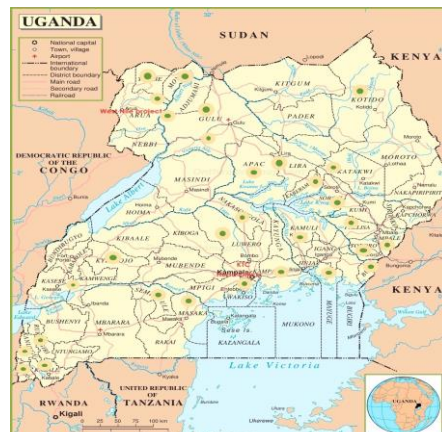
**Viv:** This is a map of Uganda with green blobs showing the location of Kulika's long-term relationships with farming communities. Many of these began as externally funded short-term projects but Kulika Uganda has sustained a relationship with farmers and communities.

Population >51 million  
47% under 15 years old

>Twice world average birth rate

>87% engaged in agriculture

Fragile peace surrounded by countries in conflict

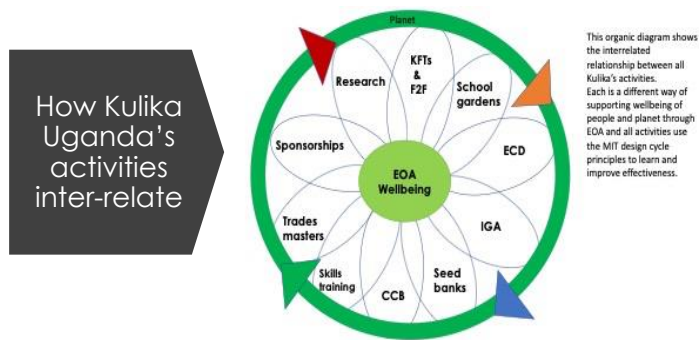


- Democratic republic – British protectorate until 1962
- President Museveni in power since 1986
- Colonial relationships founded on exploitation of tribal differences by the British are still evident in social and political relations. Compare to class system
- >1.8 million refugees hosted – largest number in Africa, 6<sup>th</sup> globally.

Physically Uganda is roughly the same size as the UK! Refugees are given access to land but not allowed to own it. They get less than half of what the host population are allocated for housing and cultivation. Despite the fact that they have much smaller plots, their production is higher than the host population and there is clear evidence that there is spillover that boosts economic output in the surrounding areas.

## Slide 8



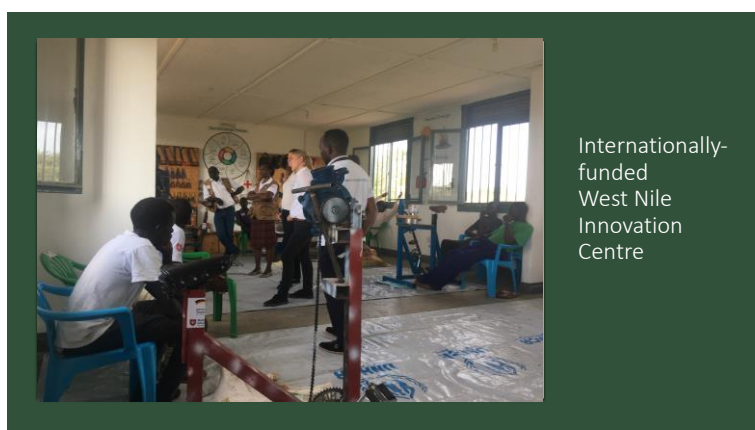


**Viv:** Kulika Uganda is a non-profit, non-governmental organisation founded in 1981 whose vision is to transform livelihoods throughout Uganda and whose mission is **to inspire communities, households and individuals with self-confidence and provide skills and knowledge to harness their resources for lasting change that is economically and environmentally sustainable in their lives.**

This Daisy diagram is an illustration of what we do when we are there - to be specific, what we do is support organisational development through: creating a space in workshops and strategic planning sessions for the team to think issues through together; theorising and offering models to shape and feed back what we see; translating reports from Ugandan English into English English; and aligning the language with the strengths approach and gift economy.

For over 40 Years Kulika has taken a systemic approach to teaching ecological organic agriculture to subsistence farmers across Uganda. The 11-month transformational Key Farmer training inspires people to share the gift of knowledge with neighbours and the wider community through extension practice. Kulika has good working relationships with local governments and supports communities for the long-term to achieve food security, healthy lifestyles, and environmental health. It intervenes at the household level to maximise impact and to ensure access to indigenous knowledge about the particular challenges faced where people live, and their possible long-term solutions. In line with the strengths approach it builds on what is already working. This slide shows how funding priorities are integrated in a truly holistic approach, using donor focus to intervene systemically and promote wellbeing of people and planet.

## Slide 9



**Av:** This picture is the inside of the Innovation Centre in West Nile, funded through European and North American aid as a 3-year project to train people in material handling skills and to use the design cycle to develop technical solutions to locally defined needs. Individuals from local refugee and host communities develop maize hullers, groundnut crushers and popcorn roasters for example, using locally available materials like old bicycles to power the machines. Some farmer groups have worked on developing irrigation systems to combat the increasing challenges of climate change in an already arid area. The work is impressive but is directed at community **economic** growth. External funding for sharing their knowledge of ecological organic agriculture has not been forthcoming.

The UNHCR Core Humanitarian Standard is clear that locally devised strategies and indigenous ownership are essential: that imposition of externally-devised solutions can undermine local capacities and create negative effects. The Innovation Centre confirms our observations that such intentions are often not achieved in practice. It pays lip-service to indigenous ownership and locally devised strategies in its failure to incorporate agricultural necessities as requested by Kulika Uganda. We have noticed that aid is normally attached to new short-term (2 to 3-year projects), externally defined and overseen. Like the innovations centre, these are increasingly directed at job creation and measured according to financial output. As research tells us, financial control is held externally, maintaining the commercial economy and myth of the trickle-down effect. As you have seen from the daisy diagram, Kulika Uganda works creatively with funding streams in line with the strengths approach - doing what they can now, where they are, with what they have, and using unrestricted funding to support core work when projects end.

## Slide 10

### Demonstration gardens: the ambition and vision

#### Kulika Training Centre West Nile



**Viv:** The West Nile area is an arid and agriculturally challenging region, where Sudanese refugees are supported by UNESCO and a plethora of international aid agencies. Initial projects have been humanitarian aid funded because of high numbers of refugees. Kulika chooses to work with equal numbers of host and refugee populations to avoid the tension created by people seeing refugees being given preferential treatment. (story). As the focus of international aid shifts from development towards humanitarian concerns, we have also noticed the emphasis on employment and financial security, with project outcomes expressed and assessed in financial, not wellbeing terms. Kulika takes time to build trust at the local level with the whole system - to create conditions for healthy and sustainable growth in line with the gift economy: their purpose is to

strengthen relationships and enable mutual flourishing of humans and the rest of life. (Example of their planting food trees around the innovation centres).

Kulika Uganda uses its unrestricted budget to address food security for all in the long-term, to build protection against political appropriation at the end of projects and as a foundation for demonstration organic gardens. Our continuing commitment is driven by consistently witnessing the transformation and abundance delivered by Kulika's key farmer training and farmer to farmer extension in many areas of Uganda.

## Slide 11

You sent us seeds,  
and we have nurtured them,  
sending you the seeds  
imbued with the taste of our  
lands  
and the care of our hands,  
in abundance.  
May the lands  
and the lords  
bless you all.

### Pumpkin seeds on a meshrefet

The Refugee Abyss (2025.128)  
with permission from Hyab Yohannes,



**Av:** We started this session with hankies as gifts and are ending it with seeds because these are the epitome of nature's gifts. In 2023 I shared pumpkin seeds from my allotment saying ' Each one is a metaphor for life – unique and full of potential and in the right conditions will produce food by September or October later this year (and many more seeds). For them to realise their gifts they will need soil, water, light and protection managed through a relationship with you.' As in the nature of the gift economy, Hyab gave seeds to a sister in Eritrea and this came back...an abundance of seeds and this poem.

## Slide 12

Cobra heritage  
beans growing  
at Kulika's  
Training  
Centre in Lutisi

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Nature's abundance can flourish when we remember our responsibility as stewards of the earth, not profiteers. Our relationship with Kulika Uganda is a reminder of the transformation that is possible when we each do what we can, honouring the gifts we have been given. It is a small step towards what Mbembe calls 'Imagining different ways of reorganising the world and redistributing the planet among all its inhabitants'.



This year we have brought heritage climbing beans for you as gifts (Cobra and Kew Blue). As we pass them round we want to summarise our answer to the question 'What do we think we are doing?' using this framework from colleagues in India writing about global social work:

## Slide 13

### What do we think we are doing?

*Protecting the gift economy through translation.*

From 'Who is a Global Social Worker?'  
Soletti and Srivastava (2024)

- Recognize colonial histories.
- Challenge Eurocentric beliefs in linear development.
- Understand the globalization of economies and consequences at the local level.
- Leverage cultural and community-level resources for practice.
- Practice cultural humility.
- Understand local social justice issues within a global framework.
- Acknowledgement of our relative wealth means that we can 'gift' our time, perspective and language.
- EOA is fully aligned with the strengths approach and is about action, here and now.
- Like Kulika, we are committed for the long term.
- We are there not to teach but to learn **with** (not from).
- The relationships are deeply personal and life affirming/enriching
- Taking action in a global context .

**Av:** Social work colleagues in India have written the principles in black which should guide the practice of global social workers. In green, we have responded by thinking about our work with Kulika Uganda and the way we use language to maintain core values of the strengths approach and gift economy in their work and in ours.

## Reading list

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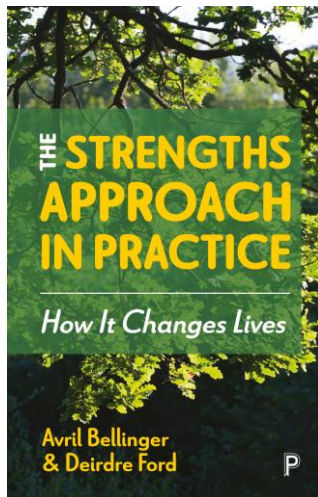
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## Principles of the Strengths Approach

1. Every individual, group, family, community and environment has potential and resources to be used in reconstructing and redirecting life.
2. Every individual, collectivity and environment has the inherent capacity for wholeness, regeneration, healing and transformation.
3. Every person and group has a fund of innate wisdom and health to draw upon in times of crisis and challenge.
4. All life has the capacity for rebound and righting the trajectory of development in the face of adversity and trauma.
5. All individuals, families, communities and cultures have rhetorical, metaphorical narrative tools to refashion and reformulate their understanding and interpretation of their situation and condition.
6. Maintaining hope comes from honouring everyone's aspiration to flourish.

(after Weick and Saleebey, 1998:27 in Bellinger and Ford, 2022:16)