

## UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration

### Episode 61: The Strengths Approach in Practice (05/12/2023)

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#### Dr Esa Aldegheri

هه آل ووس ههال - أ، benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcase series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society and identity. with us.

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#### Dr Esa Aldegheri

Welcome everybody to the podcast. My name is Esa Aldegheri and I am a research associate with the UNESCO RILA team at the University of Glasgow. Today I'm delighted to say that we are joined by our brilliant elders in residence, Deirdre Ford and Avril Bellinger, who will be talking about their book, *The Strength's Approach in Practice, How It Changes Lives*. It's a wonderful book and I can't wait to get started. But before that, Deirdre and Avril are going to introduce themselves so you know a bit more about them.

#### Deirdre Ford

Thank you very much, Esa. It's a delight and a joy to be doing this podcast with you. Hi everyone, I'm Deirdre, I'm a registered social worker, I'm also an associate of something called 'Research in Practice'. And just to say that Research in Practice works to support the learning of professionals who are working in health and social care and related sectors and enables the people that they work with to live good lives by maintaining their currency and their learning. So that's what I do.

#### Avril Bellinger

I'm Avril Bellinger. I'm an honorary associate professor in social work at the University of Plymouth, which is a wonderful place to be because I can work as much as I like and I'm no longer doing it for pay so I can do what I like; when I like; how I like. I'm also the founder of an incredible organisation called 'Students and Refugees Together', which is the focus of the book, which is founded on the strengths approach. And our book really explains how the strengths approach can work in practice in every aspect of what you do. I call myself an academic activist and that's because I've always wanted to make a difference. I'm a registered social worker too, even though I'm 73 and no longer employed by anybody. I consider what I do to be social work in all aspects of my life and the model that I use for all of that is the strength approach. So it's a delight to be part of RILA which accords really closely with everything I believe in my heart. So thank you for this opportunity.

#### Dr Esa Aldegheri

It's such a pleasure. I read your book and it's a very precise and at the same time absolutely heartening book. And you write that it's not an instruction manual about the strength approach but rather a collection of stories that illustrates the strength approach in action, and that approach to using language and stories in the arts is so, as you say, so closely aligned with what we do at UNESCO RILA. I think that's- that would be a really great place to start this conversation journey today. Would be around START, which you've already mentioned is a fantastic project, which is the heart of the book; it is narrated throughout the book as an example of the strength approach. So could we begin maybe by hearing a bit more about START?

### **Deirdre Ford**

Absolutely. So I should have mentioned that I'm also a trustee of START, so responsible for governance. So just to explain that START is an acronym for Students and Refugees Together. And START is a non-government organisation. It's a charity based in Plymouth in the south west of England. And uniquely, perhaps, it has a dual purpose. It supports refugees; people who have been granted leave to remain in the UK following a claim for asylum, and it enables them to access their rights and realize their ambitions, but START also supports the education of students on professional placements. So when students undertake the practical placement that was a requirement of their course at START, they become the main workforce, working with the people who were refugees, but also in transition like the students themselves.

START provides a casework service to people who have leave to remain. It also has a range of community activities that are core to its work. These include things like the Cultural Kitchen, which serves delicious hot food every fortnight for about on average 60 to 80 people. It offers a women's group with a space for women and creative activities such as needlework. It has two allotments - START runs two allotments in the city. It also offers refugee awareness training to local agencies, schools, police, other groups. And those refugee awareness sessions are run by students and refugees themselves and staff. And it has a walking project encouraging people to discover the wonderful countryside around Plymouth, the national park. They're on the coast and they don't realise that when they are sometimes dispersed by the home office to a city like Plymouth. They don't know where they are. So the walking project is important to take people around the city and say, look, you can access this. This is your home now. And it enables in cultural exchange and learning. So it sounds a bit formal, this introduction, Esa, but I've been involved with START since 2004. And sometimes I forget things because I'm so immersed in it, so I'll just mention the mission statement:

'Our mission is to work in partnership with families, individuals and organisations to facilitate the transition of refugees from people in need to self-reliant contributors to their local communities. START recognises the skills and experiences that refugees bring to the city and as a learning organisation START uniquely utilises the student placement as a resource which together with the strengths and skills of the community to help people to work out what support they need and how to achieve it.'

That's trying to sort of summarise 22 years worth of work to start.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Thank you, I applaud your courage in doing that. And your succinct language really - it's such an interesting journey to read about in the book because it feels as if that's what you also

do. You take us through the way that START started - sorry I had to make at least one START/started pun - and the way that you have progressed into the work that you're as you're doing it now. And in a way that illustrates the strength approach really beautifully because it shows how the strength approach has sometimes been criticized for only looking at the good things and not facing the problems and not, you know, dealing with difficulties and how it's absolutely not that. So I wonder if you could give examples from start with illustrating the strength approach in that way you know.

### **Deirdre Ford**

Yes, before I do that, sorry to start the question, but just to say a bit about the beginning of START. Because one of the main messages of the strengths approach is it's open to everybody to adopt as an approach. And there's nothing special about either of us, or any of the people, I mean, they are unique, but obviously very biased. And so the people who are involved in START we think are amazing. But our message is that anyone can do this. So in 2001, Plymouth was a dispersal area for people seeking asylum. So the Home Office, as I say, would send people to Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow - but there were no services for them. So in 2001, this kind of pressure was falling on the education offices who were trying to get children of refugee families into schools, and they were getting overwhelmed by the additional crises and needs of people for housing, for medical support, and the education officer in Avril's village - this is the kind of often replicated story, but it's an important one about how simply it began. The education officer in Avril's village was talking about her worry about one of the staff who was getting overwhelmed by all these additional kind of requests for support. So Avril at the time was a university lecturer in social work at Plymouth University, also a practice educator responsible for practice education from several hundred students on placement and she said the immortal words, now the immortal words of: "I've got some social work students; can I help you?". And START was born and that was initially in the front room of someone's house, wasn't it Avril?

### **Avril Bellinger**

When the organisation began because it's true you know the manager said: "Oh yeah okay" and I said "okay how many?" and she said "give me three" and then just before placement was due to start she wrote to me very formally and said "of course we have no office accommodation for students". And so at that point we probably should have pulled the plug and said oh it's not you know it's not properly health and safety checked and all of that and And instead I contacted the students and said: "what do you think?". They went: "yeah". And spoke to a practice educator who lived in Plymouth who'd said she would be part of this project, as it was then. And she said: "oh, I live in Plymouth, they can use my front room as their office". That's how it began. You know, we borrowed a laptop from the local social services education unit. We use the university resources for paper, postage, books, all of those sorts of things. And we just, to be honest, we made it up as we went along. And the strength approach is exactly that. It's going, what might be possible here? Let's have a look at, you know, what have we got? How could we use it? How could we do something that makes a difference? And of course, over those first two or three years, my heart was in my mouth most of the time. You know, we had, it was - there were mobile phones in those days, fortunately. And so everybody just talked to each other all the time about what they were doing, how they were doing it. And that's what kind of kept it safe, if you like. Whenever we had the award boards and student work came up for assessment to see whether the

students had had a good experience or not - because they probably only worked with three families during their placement, which was quite limited compared to what other students were doing- but the depth in which they worked meant that they had no difficulty passing all the course requirements. So that was one of the first tests really is, you know, we know this is a good thing, does it fit within the academic structure in the first place? And so the book contains all of these, kind of, the organisational development things, you know, the obstacles on the way. But really, it started as a good idea. And you talked about bravery, Esa.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Yes, I think you're both extremely brave in the most wonderful, wonderful, inspiring way. It's proven, it's all in your book. You say such courageous and encouraging things - you know: "we believe that it is possible to make things happen in any situation if we are brave enough", from the preface, page 15.

### **Avril Bellinger**

Well I have at one point in START's history - because you know organisations don't just grow but it's like. Plants don't just grow, they need care, you know, they they they go off in the wrong directions, things like that, you've got to look after them. And we had somebody who was an HR person and consultant and she came and did a - did an away day with us and at the end of that she called me reckless. What's the worst that can happen in this life? You know what's the worst? Well we die don't we? At the end of it that's that's what happens. So, in the meantime, let's give it a good go.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

And again, you say you both, you both write about the strength approach: "it should be seen as a position, a way of thinking and most of all a practice". So there's a wonderful focus on small changes, doing something to change a situation that's difficult or perhaps even dangerous, and you call it a way of thinking about social problems that harnesses the strength and potential of people, their communities and environment, even in conditions of the most depleted social capital. In so many ways right now we're living through really difficult, especially people who stand for the right to refuge and asylum, who work constantly against to what feels like a deluge of negative initiatives shall we say and so this this sense of looking at things the way they are even if everything feels depleted and difficult and dangerous, and anyway finding the strength and the courage - I repeat that word - to do what needs done so I would love to hear more about this aspect of the strengths approach in your work.

### **Deirdre Ford**

One of the sources of strength for us is the people we work with, people who themselves have escaped conflict, forced migration, ingenuity and resilience to get to the UK, which, you know, as you've outlined, is so it's increasingly difficult. So by making alliances, by students working alongside them, and students haven't gotten the baggage of someone like me, I've worked, you know, far too many years in local authority and government organisations, and I know all the 'yes, but' arguments. Students don't have that - they don't know what is actually quite: 'oh my goodness, astounding'. So they go and do it and they're supported with refugees, you know, themselves who have considerable skills. So I just wanted to go back a step. This is not a new model. What frustrates us is that other people don't adopt it.

But students are a unique and valuable resource. Elsewhere Avril has written about students are not a burden on placement organisations. They're not a burden on the local government office or the health setting. If you're lucky, you can have one of our students in the same way that refugees are not a burden. We are so fortunate to have the people in our - but this is not a new arrangement. Going back to the 19th century, we had something called the settlement movement in both the UK and in America, in this country under Cannon Barnett and in America under Jane Addams, where people who became very senior - Prime Minister of England Clement Attlee, worked alongside people in the poorer communities of East London and learnt their trade and that gave rise to the NHS and the welfare state in this country. So we get frustrated that people could adopt this model by harnessing the enthusiasm, the energy and the commitment to students to work alongside refugees with homeless people, with young people and they all applaud it, they all really love START but they don't do it. Just a quick brief before I come back to your question, or we both come back to your question a lot: updates!

So we now have seven staff members working at the start, 22 years later, as I said, two of whom are former refugees, both from Eritrea, both serve extraordinarily wonderful coffee, but they are also Arabic speakers, so they save a lot of time, they know the community, they're trusted by the community so that's a huge kind of important development. But we also have two occupational therapy students at the moment whose placement will end this month. But we have two students from Germany; placement will end in December. We have Plymouth University social work students and we have casework volunteers, two of those as well, but you know- over time we've probably been responsible for training, what, 300 students, serving more than 2,000 refugee households.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

There's such a sense, all these people you're talking about, there's such a sense now in your words and also through your book about how community is important. It's one of the key focuses of your book and your work and I was very inspired and fascinated by your thoughts and your experience on growing community. You talk about community growing, not so much community development. So I think that's really interesting. And as you say, they're not, these things have been done before, but it feels as if perhaps we always need reminders that they have been done and they can be done, and this is how one particular group of people in one particular time is doing them, so that others may gain inspiration and strength - and courage. So I was really interested by your thoughts on growing community and creating commons; it felt like that was another really important focus of your work and without that sense the strength approach perhaps wouldn't have been so easy to employ, if that's the right word, to adopt, to embrace. So I'd love to hear more about that as well in connection to the strength approach.

### **Avril Bellinger**

Talking about community in the book - you know we express our frustration about the way community tends to be constructed as places or people with the same interests or... when really everything we believe about people is that we are living, we are cooperative, we are growth orientated and we are immensely powerful. You know we talk about individuals being extraordinary; we think that of the people who make START what it is. But *everybody's* extraordinary. You know, given a half a chance to flourish, everybody is capable of incredible things. All the best things about the world are there because people are extraordinary and

because life is extraordinary and that people are part of life. You know, Rutger Bregman is a just, you know, for people who haven't read *Humankind*, then, he kind of gives us back faith in the fact that humans are wonderfully productive, cooperative and competent in the world. You know, you read Robin Wall Kimmerer, you know, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she kind of reminds us of the importance of respecting life in all its forms including human life. So community, to be turned into a thing which can be defined and have a boundary around it and to be given a purpose and a function and usually, that purpose and function ends up getting described in economic terms. You know, asset-based community development, ABCD, is something that makes me feel unwell because it's all about turning people into producers of economic benefit for somebody else usually. When we were writing this chapter, it was actually a student who said to us, a psychology student, that there was something wrong with talking about *building* community, that it was a static thing. And it was she, Lucy Ray-Coneyard, who also writes in the book, who talked about *growing* community. And that just made all the sense in the world, because community is a dynamic thing. It never reaches a point of being fixed, you know, it's not done.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

You talk about community being a 'process, not a product', which is also fundamental it feels.

### **Avril Bellinger**

Yes, yes, it's the doing and being, not the describing that makes for a community. A community is made up of lots of relationships that impact on each other, and that's really why all the things we described like women's group and cultural kitchen and the allotment are places where those relationships can happen: relationships with each other and relationships with the environment. And that's the other part. What we need as humans is to be connected to the Earth, you know, to where we are. That's one of our primary needs and all the environmentalists are very clear that our relationship with the natural world is vital to the survival of the planet and to our own mental health and well-being.

And this is where my kind of passion, if you like, about commons comes from. Because what we know is that, environmentally, most of those natural resources that we benefit from and which we must serve in order that they continue - you know, much in Robin Wall Kimmerer's book - then they have been enclosed and the benefit of them has been removed from the people whose livelihood was invested in looking after them and where that reciprocal benefit existed, and instead they've been asset stripped. You know, so all the Indigenous communities who are living or trying to survive, mining precious metals; lithium, coal, gas, The people who live in the Amazon whose very biodome is being destroyed around them - their work was to care for that environment. That's what they were there for. But commerce moves in and strips out, says, "oh, this is nice. This doesn't belong to anybody, we'll have that", much in the same way as happened in this country 150 to 200 years ago, when large areas which had been looked after and cared for by the people who benefited from it were suddenly enclosed. Those people had to move to cities and factories and become a workforce and they, you know, those areas then became degraded and it is the exploitation of the commons that has led to where we are now and I think if we understand that then we look very carefully at what can be preserved and how we preserve it. There's wonderful writing by Guy Standing about the 'blue commons' and he talks about the way in which

natural resources, which people lived from in a sustainable way, have been exploited by big business and how that's contributed to the climate catastrophe.

**Dr Esa Aldegheri**

But you talk a lot as well about the difference between creating Commons and providing services. And the examples that you give from START are about using the strengths approach to, to create Commons. But often it feels as if over the years people have thought that, you know, they're providing a service and try to fit you into that kind of way of seeing and doing. But that's not actually how it works. And that's what you argue doesn't necessarily work. So I'd love to hear your thoughts about that as well, creating a commons. I mean, a commons is something that is held by all the people who benefit from it, and most often as you've been talking wonderfully, we think of commons as a natural space or an environment, and in your book you can make it very clear that yes it's that, and also many, many more things and I'd love to hear more about that.

**Avril Bellinger**

A good example of that is probably Cultural Kitchen.

**Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Okay.

**Avril Bellinger**

Because as Deirdre says, you know, every fortnight up to a hundred people from all over the world, who are at different stages in the asylum system and students and staff, volunteers – all get together and cook together and eat it and wash up. And it's a really community activity. And lots of people over the years have tried to turn it into catering service, into a place where the needy come and get fed, or where people can learn to cook, or in some way they have tried to see it as something that fits into a transactional relationship. We do this and you get that and possibly you pay for it or someone else pays for it, but it is on that basis. And actually how Cultural Kitchen works is that a room is provided, people plan food and cook together. But the most important thing is that it's a safe space for people to come and be, and eat together and do whatever they choose to do. Activities for children, some of which is running around and around the tables [laughs]. A chance for adults - to at one point one of the women decided she was going to set up an English conversation group. The men have their own version of that, they very often go outside and sit and smoke together. It's a process where people have to find a place that they fit for themselves, where they can give and receive equally. Deirdre and I used to work at the university and at Friday night, five o'clock, we'd had enough, we were tired out, deeply treated, ready to go home and - oh god it's kitchen, so we'd trail on down, you know. It would all be happening: people, students and refugees and stuff, chopping things and serving things and kids running about and so forth. I would walk in and I would think, "Oh gosh, this is hard because there's nothing, there's no place ready for me. I'm not in charge of this, I'm not in control of this, I've just got to be here." And by the end of the evening, I was replenished. And that's *because* there was no place for me, there was no job for me. I had to find a way to contribute and in doing that I felt better. And we guard - START guards that space very fiercely in everything it does.

**Deirdre Bellinger**

Yeah I'll built on what Avril said because it isn't easy going to Cultural Kitchen and we've been surprised - sometimes we've had visitors who are social workers and they don't know how to kind of work with it really and relate to it. You know it requires you to, sort of, sit down and talk to people who have very limited English and my Parsi, my Arabic are virtually non-existent, but I have the warmest relationship with Fatima for example, who's from Tehran and we've known each other for many years now. We aren't able to exchange a lot of language but enormous warmth and and friendship and health. And as I've all said, it replenishes us. What we get out of being part of that community, but there's no doubt we grow up because we sit down and we try and relate on whatever level, whether it's football or chess or giving children back to parents 'cause they've run away - or that's part of the growing. It's about interacting with people. I absolutely love it! Because the minimal, kind of, interest in someone: what they're wearing, children, sparks off that kind of interaction. And people, you know, sadly say that they really like coming to Kitchen because people aren't racist towards them, British people aren't racist there. And so they themselves are motivated to make those links as well. So it's a very, it's a very good place to grow a community. And there are stalwarts there, there's always, you know, certain people that we meet there who are rock solid, and they're there in other places as well. They're there on the allotment, they're there when we need a service user, we still use that term, so we should use a kind of advocacy group. I've been bailed out by them and we've had to meet with the council and they've come along as well and said "it'll be all right!"

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Yes, it's a wonderful example. Again, all the stories in your book are woven through and they're on the one hand extremely practical and helpful examples of how to do this using this approach. At the same time, as you've just both been wonderfully illustrating, it's so much about process and not product and in a way letting go of control which I can see how people find difficult because we're not trained to that are we? We're trained to quantify and prove and justify in ways that perhaps could be understandable but are often quite stifling to the process itself which is where you seem to, you know, where you say that there is richness and nourishment.

### **Deirdre Ford**

In respect of process, social workers always have the stood process and other psychotherapeutic-like based practices like counselling - we define processes that reflect on the components of interactions such as relationships, the journey in social casework and the how of interventions. To my sadness, process, the word process has been hijacked, I mean procedure, and in the worst case scenario we *process* people through the migration system. And yes, of course we talk about processes and our administrative systems and how to get people through the job centre, for example. But we also, in my head, always this process as a journey, as the how, and that's really, really precious. And, you know, targets and performance indicators mitigate against process because they drive it in directions, it doesn't, and it's not what it's about. We're very outcomes driven in local government work as well. But we may never *achieve* that outcome. But the journey to get there is phenomenal, in terms of how- Someone who is the only person from Kurdistan at one point had no friends in the city, but, talked to us and felt better to doing that, making those relationships. And it was a process that, you know, even though the outcome wasn't



necessarily a housing or finding other people from his own country in the city, but wanting to attain the richness of a process as they find in that way and it takes time sometimes.

### **Avril Bellinger**

It's true though, it's, I think in very simple terms really, which is that it is not what you do, it's how you do it. And coming back to creating commons, how you do it is to tolerate an enormous amount of messiness and chaos because you don't know what's going to happen. You have to stop things changing the space, you know, like people coming in and wanting to use it for some other purpose and to use people, which is what often happens with refugees. It's to hold the chaos so that creative, wonderful things can happen, just like at the spring school! That's really the spring school, which is why we felt so at home there. You know, it's a place where magic happens - because it can.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Conversations happen and stories are exchanged and for me, the spring school and this conversation and your book were a wonderful antidote to sometimes as a researcher, unfortunately, I come across people who engage in extractive practices or ways of being or, you know, relationships that you think are going to be helpful and then you realize you're doing all the giving and actually nothing comes back. So what I would love to talk about now in perhaps a geeky kind of researcher way, but here we are [laughs]. One of your chapters is especially on research, and I find it really inspiring, your statement that research is always an intervention. So perhaps could you indulge me and any other researchers listening, hello - by talking about how the strengths approach can support positive research practices and interventions that are not extractive and not about advancing your career using that interview to write *your* sole authored paper to get to that job that you've not told anyone else about.

### **Avril Bellinger**

Indeed, thank you for this question, Esa. You'll notice in all the ways I describe myself, I am not a researcher. I have enormous respect for people who manage that position, that place in academia. I found academia hard enough as an activist and a social worker. The only times that I wander into the territory of research, I start to feel physically unwell. I'm the research coordinator for START. I have been the, kind of, facilitator of a piece of NIHR funded research co-application and luckily, fortunately, I've now handed that over to somebody in the team who it doesn't make feel unwell. So just to say again, process is much more important than product. And I think that in our society and in our academic world, that research has become an industry. It is a place where, as you say Esa, people make their livelihood. It is financially driven, economically driven. It's a site, without any doubt, of capitalist exploitation. I am regularly flabbergasted by the amount of money that goes into research for groups of people where there is absolutely no money whatsoever, like refugees. You may probably at the moment attract quite a lot of money for refugee homelessness as people are being thrown out of refugee accommodation with no resources in place to accommodate them. So I bet you, you could get money for that at the moment, as if the government cares! What you can't get is money to offer provision for people; to actually treat people as human.

### **Deirdre Ford**

I'm going to challenge you because you are a contradiction in that the person who has always, *always* fought all the time that starts being in existence, you've fought for it to have a research profile. So I think for listeners they need to understand that I know firsthand how painful research has been for you and there's published papers that document that as well. But you know you certainly managed to achieve your research outcomes against the odds. But you have always push for research and start, you support research students, you give so much time for it. Why do you do that? I think it's important to clarify it for people because you say you want to research, but you do lots of research using appreciative inquiry.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Yeah, what I was wanting to know is, yes, it's, it can be absolutely soul destroying and awful, but in your book there's a whole chapter about research and how the strengths approach can support it to be positive.

### **Avril Bellinger**

The thing is that that strengths approach recognises how things actually are, not how we'd *like* them to be. And so my first part of the answer is that: this is how it is. That research, it is a commons that has been enclosed. Research is actually doing, with the best integrity you can muster, your absolute utmost to find out things that we need to know. That's what research is. Now that's been enclosed so that it becomes something that is formulaic, has to meet certain requirements and feeds that financial machine. Now, I think research is finding things out. I came across a most wonderful window as I walked through Plymouth and in it was a presentation that I'd missed sadly by Lois Klassen. You know Lois Klassen? Well, RILA's going to love Lois Klassen, I can tell you. She is a Canadian researcher and she produces, amongst other things, something called *Reading the Migrant Library*. And her work is artistic. It is developmental. It is... You can't actually put it into a category. And because of that, it's alive and joyful. Anyone who's listening, look her up. K-L-A-S-S-E-N, Lois Klassen. Her work's connected to the wider environment and all of that. So I think whatever you do to try and find out what you want to learn, you are being active. I'm a practitioner, you know, social work is practice. It's about trying to achieve social justice, working with and for people and the planet about that. So we know that everything we do is practice, you know, it's intervention. I was flabbergasted as a new researcher when I went, a new academic, when I went to a research group thinking, "oh, I can't find something out here". When everybody talking about practice was talking about *research* practice. They weren't talking about what I thought practice was, which is trying to do things to make a difference. I can't work out how to make sense of that boundary between what you do in order to try and make sense of things and to contribute to this understanding of our place in the world and how we can live it better; and research. It seems to me that it's a false line that is put there so that people can benefit from being within it. So. I have massive admiration for the work of the RILA team and all of those like you who find ways of complying with that boundary and at the same time doing something real. Because it's only in the activity, it's only in the process, that we have any control. We have no control over the outcome. I'm careful about talking about appreciative inquiry as *the* answer, because there isn't one. But I always come back to that as a research orientation that encourages people to be able to look for what works. To see what's good and to make more of it because what we look at, we get more of. You know, what we focus on, we get more work.

**Dr Esa Aldegheri**

- Yeah. –

**Deirdre Ford**

I think also building again on what you've said, Avril, and very simply, well: two things. First of all, I'll say, Esa, social work, practice and research are quite similar in how you collect information, how you make assessments. There was a lot of writing, probably about 10, 15 years ago in social work about the parallels between social work practice and research skills and how to do that. And I think what we aim to do, 'cause I don't want to undersell the research component of START, it's vital and it's, Avril especially has just led that really well and against the odds has engendered a very healthy and very productive and respectable kind of research environment at START. And we teach students how to conduct research with people so that we make phrases like co-production, which are getting a bit worn out, real. And people are respectful and understand that, you know, some research requests that we get from start, we will turn down because they're exploitative of the people. They see people as subjects and participants and they don't involve the people they are working with sufficiently. So we teach hopefully good research behaviours amongst students. And of course, because they are learners, they get a depth of knowledge. They see things that are, you know, unique because that's the nature of it. And as new patterns emerge within refugee practice and policy and, you know, it's just their learning; and it's crucial.

**Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Yeah it's really crucial and again one of the reasons I loved your book so much was because there are these very deep and also wide considerations of what matters and considerations about process and commons, but also very practical, specifically grounded in your own stories, ways of doing these things. So there's, you talk about about skilled and active listening as critical and also you - one of my favourite bits was when you suggest seven really specific kinds of questions, about listening and dialogue. I'm thinking that people should absolutely now be encouraged yet again to buy this book and learn about these. One other aspect in which I felt there was so much crossover and cross-pollination between the work that you're doing and the work that Eunice Gorilla and many other good folk across the country and beyond are doing was your focus on stories. This is true in a wider social context and related to work with individuals and so, you know, you share your own stories but I'd love to here as a reflection on in a way weaving all these aspects together, relationships and commons and community and research, the centrality of stories and being able to listen actively to stories that are told.

**Deirdre Ford**

So we give as an example in the book, a story of the students working with a Sudanese farmer and having to construct: the job centre in this country will require you to have a CV, a curriculum vitae, a resume, and completely alien to a farmer from Sudan who felt he had nothing to offer, he hadn't worked in an office. So the student works with him and simply asks him what he did in Sudan. And it transpired that he and his father raised and sold sheep and cattle. And so the student discovers that the farmer can handle cash, they're good at buying and selling, and has managed this. And so he's able to construct the CV based on what that farmer achieved in his own country, but constructing it in our terms. One of our dilemmas is that we have to tell stories all the time about people to get the funding,

whether on the level of the organization, and that's kind of portraying refugees as a group, or whether it's about individuals as social workers, needs to maximize people's benefits. And I, you know, have firsthand knowledge of being guilty of portraying things quite harshly. This person can't do this, they can't do that, give them money. We need that disability top up, that premium. So we've played the worst case scenario to try and get that. And there's a danger we do that with funding. But what students have to do is to learn the art of helping people to restore their lives in this country and to recognise what they do bring with them and how that might apply here and how it helps them to re-story their lives, also to be able to celebrate their strengths so that they can make progress in this country. So it's quite an art really. And the whole question of stories is, and being alive to how we help people - people are quite self-deprecating, both in a profession like social work and students themselves. And so we need to, again, keep talking about Robin Wall Kimmerer, but she said that each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction. So it's about students acting as what Denis Felipe calls an 'affirmative mirror' to people. So mirror back to beam back to them, they're positive attributes, no achievements.

### **Avril Bellinger**

People dealing with the most difficult personal circumstances, know most about how to survive in those circumstances. And it is really careless of us if we don't listen, if we don't try to learn from people who are in the most awful circumstances. Those questions in the world, about how have you managed thus far; what has kept your spirit alive? One of the things you were asking about, Esa, was where we talk about the quietest voices.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Yeah, this connects so well. I was just about to come in and say that because you say in your book, one of the really great things about the book is that at the end of every chapter there are learning points. I just love that as someone who's always going to be a learner. It's just like, oh, thank you, learning points. One of the learning points is this brilliant quote: "In times of crisis particularly, give the quiet stories your full attention. They contain wisdom about survival." It feels as if this is absolutely what you were talking about, Avril.

### **Avril Bellinger**

Exactly. Because, I mean, we know, you know, in this work people talk about hard to reach. Actually, people aren't hard to reach, they're hard to hear, they're hard to listen to, because what it then does is push us towards doing something about what we hear. And I just think it's, as a teacher, as a social worker, we are taught always to listen to the person who's not speaking, who's the person who's sitting there quietly thinking that they don't have anything to contribute? Because once you can listen to what that person has to say, it could change anything. You know, Robin Wall Kimmerer says, yes, we must have confidence in who we are and what we know and so forth, but lots of people don't. The strengths approach assumes that people have that wisdom and it goes looking for it and that's what makes it so active. There's never nothing you can do. You can ask and listen.

### **Deirdre Ford**

And we have to be careful not to re-story people's lives using the kind of terminology of migration systems and political rhetoric. For instance, Cornwall Council this year, as part of Refugee Week, made some videos. They created videos to share stories of refugees in

Cornwall for Cornwall resettlement service, and you can provide a link for that, it's online. And their intention was to bring to life the human stories behind the word refugee. So you have a video of Majur, who's from Iraq, he's a C.D. And he came to this country in 2017 to Cornwall, really loves the countryside of Cornwall, reminds him of home, really appreciates the kindness of people. But he talks about hating the word refugee, how that constructs him. He's put in a different class. When he was living back in Iraq and it's still, you know, before he escaped persecution by ISIS, he had to maintain a low profile and minimize difference. He had to speak the right language so that he didn't draw attention to himself. And yet he feels that's what's happening with terms like refugee. It created a barrier for him between society and refugees. And he talks about those so many stories associated with refugees, about people don't know the reality in Cornwall about people and their background and why they're here. They just use this blanket term refugee. And then Majur concludes by saying: "I don't think it's right to put these barriers between humans". So it's a kind of solitary lesson about, you know, how in our kind of helping role that we don't inadvertently story people for them. And they themselves, like we talked about funders, having to tell stories of hardship to get their asylum claim recognized so they have a need to remain. And then that leads to processes of internalised oppression where they start to become this lesser, you know, second class citizen or this person without those skills. And so all that's quite a skilled art that we have to share with students, about how to conduct active listening. And there's plenty, we draw on the counseling authors like Gerard Egan, 'skilled helper', and that to teach people active listening. We've both done that in that case.

#### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

And to keep reminding each other of these skills and accept that we'll always be learners and we'll always need to be reminded. It's really, yeah, it's so true about what you say, restoring ourselves on each other and on being aware and awake to new ideas that may not be new ideas, but maybe we've just never heard them before in that particular way.

#### **Avril Bellinger**

And our ability to listen to the larger narratives we're being used to accept. And currently, I mean, one of the things about the strengths approach, we said at the beginning how it's not just about looking at the positive. An absolute essential aspect is to be aware of what rubbish we are asked to swallow, and to approach critically the biggest stories that we're being given. I wrote this morning with the word 'squeamish' in my head and that's because Suella Braverman used that word at the Conservative conference saying that we must not be squeamish about being called racist. In other words, the story that the Conservative Party are telling at the moment is that racism's fine; we can treat people who are forced migrants as if they were not human. And that's the story we're being told. Which is why the video from Cornwall that Deirdre just talked about is so precious, because the intention is to disconnect us in our heads from our fellow humans. And I think a critical listening to the biggest stories is equally important.

#### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Yeah, and the importance of listening and asking the right questions runs right through your book and clearly also your work with the premise of everyone can always do something if they are brave enough. And one of the reasons I would recommend this book to everyone who's listening, once again *The Strengths Approach in Practice, How It Changes Lives* by Avril

Bellinger and Deirdre Ford, published by Policy Press in 2022, is because you very openly have chapters for many different people relating how the Strengths Approach can support their work, from activists to researchers to social workers, teachers, people who are engaged with the laws, practitioners or who are resisting certain laws as activists. And above all, I think it's deeply true what you say that your book is a challenge to feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness. And I know that many of my colleagues and friends are grappling right now with these feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness against what seem insurmountable and constantly growing challenges. So I think it would be wonderful as a closing part of this conversation - which will not end, which will continue, but it's at the moment in this podcast that will be coming to an end. Some thoughts about that: the challenge to feelings of inadequacy and powerlessness and how the strengths approach can help transform these feelings into something else.

### **Deirdre Ford**

I'm going to steal the strap line, which is something that we've found ourselves saying again and again, which is: "do what you can, where you can, with what you have". And I've learnt this from climate activists who know only too well what's happening to the planet. And again and again, people are interviewed and asked, you know, how existentially do you cope with your knowledge? And it's by doing something. And so we do what we can. And I derive great strength in that, together with all the other things we said about being alongside community and working with people and learning from both students and from refugees.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Thank you.

### **Avril Bellinger**

There's an article by Professor Michael Mann who identified the hockey stick and then was undermined in his knowledge and his warning about the plan. He talks about the fact that climate change is on the cusp. He says we're not doomed yet. And he says that the obstacles are largely political. And I think that what changes politics is culture. And so for each person listening, we are all part of culture. And even the smallest act of celebration of life, of presenting alternative is valuable. So as Deirdre says, you know, whatever we can do, where we are, we've what we can: that's essential and that we just do it. Just do it.

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So what I'm going to do now is thank you both vastly for your work and your sharing of your words, this wonderful book that you've written and for being with us here today and I look forward to how our conversations will continue and evolve and the other work that will be shared I'm very sure.

[JINGLE]

### **Dr Esa Aldegheri**

شكراً, grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for شكراً, more information about our work, please visit [bit.ly/UNESCO\\_RILA](https://bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA).

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