

BUSINESS FOR BETTER SOCIETY

Threads of Transformation Program

Status Update Report

Opening Comments



In regions scarred by conflict and displacement, young people and women face the challenge of rebuilding their identities and creating sustainable livelihoods. At Business for Better Society, we believe that vocational training must go beyond technical skills to address the deeper emotional wounds that conflict leaves behind.

Threads of Transformation emerged from the belief that creativity is a powerful tool for both healing and economic empowerment. By repurposing military garments into new, marketable products, participants engage in work that is practical, therapeutic, and symbolic. The act of reconstructing a military uniform into something beautiful mirrors the personal journey of transformation itself by taking fragments of a painful past and weaving them into something new.

We also recognise that post-conflict recovery requires programs that foster social cohesion alongside economic development. When women from different South Sudanese clans work side by side, they begin to see one another as individuals with shared aspirations rather than as representatives of opposing groups.

This report documents the journey of Threads of Transformation from its pilot in Goma, DRC, through its suspension due to escalating violence, and into its next phase in the Adjumani refugee settlements of northern Uganda. It is a story of resilience, adaptation, and unwavering commitment.

I want to extend special thanks to Ms. Saskia Lenaerts, whose shared vision and extraordinary dedication as program lead have been instrumental in bringing Threads of Transformation to life. Her ability to blend fashion design with therapeutic practice has created something truly transformative.

I am also deeply grateful to Ms. Marie Lang for her unwavering support, program ideas, and encouragement throughout this journey.

I am immensely proud of what our team, our partners, and most importantly, our participants have achieved. This is about what becomes possible when we invest in people's creative potential and trust in the power of collaboration to bridge the deepest divides.

I invite you to discover the transformative power of this remarkable initiative.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'K Brantner', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Kelly Brantner
CEO, Business for Better Society

Threads of Transformation



For over five years, BBS has partnered with the locally registered non-profit Remember Youth for Change (RYC) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Since 2016, RYC has supported youth affected by the ongoing civil conflict in Eastern DRC, with special focus on former child soldiers and war-traumatized youth.

In 2022, BBS was awarded a grant from GlobalGiving to support emergency humanitarian efforts near Goma and implement long-term development projects. One of the flagship initiatives funded through this grant was RYC's tailoring program which was equipped with additional sewing machines and key supplies such as thread, pattern paper, tape measures, pins and other critical materials to run their programming.

The tailoring program now offers beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels, and has made a tangible difference in the community by providing clothing for refugee children, school uniforms, and reusable sanitary pads for women in refugee camps.

Threads of Transformation is the follow-up program that worked with six advanced tailoring graduates. Led by Ms. Saskia Lenaerts, a London-based designer with experience at Burberry and Alexander McQueen and an instructor at Kingston School of Art, this initiative focuses on design innovation, garment repurposing, and creative expression.

At its core, Threads of Transformation is a blend of fashion, healing, and sustainability. It explores how design can serve as a therapeutic practice, help dismantle stigma, and provide the tools for long-term livelihood. Through this initiative, individuals are not only building skills but they are reclaiming their narratives, contributing to their communities, and becoming powerful agents of change.

The pilot, launched in the autumn of 2024, focused on fostering experimentation and creative thinking among the six selected apprentices. By emphasising the emotional dimensions of the creative process, the program encouraged guided exploration over rigid exercises with predetermined outcomes. This innovative approach underscored the importance of expanding creativity through experimentation, empowering participants to break free from conventional rules and techniques.

Pilot Key Learning & Activity Highlights

Draping Exercises

Activity: Apprentices draped old military garments on each other, transforming them into new items through various techniques such as cutting and combining fabrics.

Outcome: This activity encouraged creativity in shape-making and silhouette design, fostering a deeper connection to their own identities.

Observational Drawing

Activity: Apprentices engaged in drawing exercises using their non-dominant hand and drawing without looking at the paper.

Outcome: These techniques helped them overcome inhibitions related to traditional drawing standards, promoting a sense of freedom in artistic expression.

Patchwork Collage Creation

Activity: Using leftover military fabric, apprentices collaboratively created a large patchwork piece that expressed sentiments related to their experiences.

Outcome: The resulting artwork served as a therapeutic manifestation of their struggles, juxtaposing themes of violence and peace through visual language.

Paper Collage Storytelling

Activity: Apprentices selected visuals from newspapers to create collages that reflected their narratives.

Outcome: This exercise fostered critical thinking as they articulated the meanings behind their choices, revealing deeper insights into their humanity and desires for peace.

Finalisation of Projects

Activity: In subsequent classes, apprentices refined their earlier works using hands-on skills, culminating in a sense of pride and accomplishment.

Outcome: Further development of practical sewing techniques and engaged in discussions about their creative journeys.

A Documentary Emerges



During the pilot project, BBS had the privilege of collaborating with Belgium-based photographer and videographer Thomas Freteur. Under the direction of our director, Ms. Vitoria de Mello Franco, Thomas spent eight days working closely with our young apprentices and the team at Remember Youth for Change.

Filmed in November 2024, just before the M23 militia's incursion into Goma, it preserves a vital moment of hope and transformation amid rising instability.

The film follows our six apprentices as they participate in the Threads of Transformation program. It documents their daily journeys, both literal and emotional, from their homes through the streets of Goma to the sewing studio. There, they are not only building skills in fashion design but also reclaiming their identities, expressing their aspirations, and strengthening their resilience through creative practice.

Through intimate interviews, hands-on workshops, and powerful musical moments, the documentary shows how creativity becomes a catalyst for personal healing and growth, helping young people navigate the long-term impacts of war, displacement, and trauma.

Looking ahead, our 2026 distribution strategy will ensure the documentary reaches influential and diverse audiences. We intend to premiere the film in London bringing together policymakers, educators, and community leaders to discuss youth resilience and post-conflict recovery.

We will also submit the film to leading international documentary and human rights festivals, including IDFA (Amsterdam), Hot Docs (Toronto), the Human Rights Watch Film Festival (London/New York), and the Geneva International Film Festival. While festival selection is competitive, these platforms offer meaningful opportunities for visibility and global engagement.

Beyond festivals, we will host targeted screenings with organisations that can integrate the film into their programming.

Goma Program Suspension



As the capital of North Kivu province, Goma holds significant strategic importance as both a humanitarian and economic hub. However, this role has been severely undermined by escalating violence, which has forced many development initiatives, including Threads of Transformation, to halt operations.

The security situation in the region continues to deteriorate, creating a complex humanitarian and economic crisis. More than 2.5 million people have been displaced within North Kivu, with many of them now concentrated around Goma. Civilians face serious protection risks as they find themselves caught in conflict zones. At the same time, local businesses and livelihoods have been brought to a standstill due to widespread economic paralysis. Supply chains have been severely disrupted, leading to rising prices for essential commodities. The situation has also triggered growing food insecurity in an area that was once known for its agricultural productivity.

Given this increasingly volatile environment, Threads of Transformation was suspended in January, 2025 due to several critical challenges. First and foremost were the security concerns. The deteriorating conditions made it increasingly unsafe for staff and participants to continue the program. Additionally, the project's use of military garments as materials for transformation became highly sensitive in an active conflict zone, where uniforms carry strong security implications.

Perception also played a major role. The association with military-linked materials raised significant concerns regarding how the project might be viewed within the community, especially in a region where affiliations with armed groups can have life-threatening consequences. As a result, Remember Youth for Change made the difficult decision to destroy all apprentice work and designs created during the pilot phase.

Lastly, the project faced substantial operational challenges. Supply chain breakdowns, movement restrictions, and resource shortages made it impossible to sustain the program. Collectively, these factors led to the unavoidable decision to pause Threads of Transformation in Goma for the foreseeable future.

Shifting to Uganda's Adjumani Settlements



BBS continues to monitor the situation in the DRC and remains in regular communication with Remember Youth for Change. We remain fully committed to these young people and it is our firm intention to continue working with the six apprentices in some format when feasible.

The program was always envisioned as a scalable initiative, adaptable to different regions affected by conflict and displacement. Its strength lies in its ability to evolve in response to local realities while preserving the essence of its mission: turning symbols of division into tools for unity and opportunity.

With this vision in mind, Threads of Transformation takes on new life in the Adjumani refugee settlements in Northern Uganda. This next chapter will work specifically with women from the distinct tribes of South Sudan who have sought refuge there. Many of these tribes have a long and painful history of animosity. When civil war erupted in South Sudan in December 2013, individuals carrying generational grievances and negative stereotypes were forced into shared refugee settlements in northern Uganda. Over the years, tensions have intensified. In recent times, inter-tribal and inter-clan violence, including arson attacks and killings, has increased, straining not only the relationships among refugees but also between the refugee population and Ugandan host communities caught in the crossfire.

In response to these challenges, the Threads of Transformation program in Adjumani also places a strong emphasis on inter-tribal peacebuilding. We believe that the most sustainable path to peaceful coexistence is through meaningful connections, and bringing together individuals from different tribes, clans, and communities to engage in dialogue and begin the process of “unlearning” historical prejudices. The women participating in this program will not only gain creative and entrepreneurial skills by upcycling conflict-associated materials into marketable products, but they will also build relationships across tribal lines, contributing to healing and reconciliation.

The Adjumani program is both a continuation and an evolution of the Threads of Transformation initiative. It serves as a practical opportunity to continue testing and refining the model, while staying true to the program’s core values of empowerment, healing, and peacebuilding through creativity and collaboration.

As Threads of Transformation expands into the Adjumani Settlements, the program was thoughtfully adapted to reflect and honour the local context. The program incorporates traditional South Sudanese crafts as a core component of its programming. By embedding these rich cultural practices into the framework of Threads of Transformation, the project will not only build technical and entrepreneurial skills, but also create space for cultural exchange, healing, and unity among the diverse tribes residing in the settlements.

Traditional crafts such as beadwork and embroidery hold deep cultural meaning and are powerful symbols of identity for South Sudanese communities. More than a form of artistic expression, these crafts become a vehicle for economic empowerment, social cohesion, and peacebuilding.

By working collaboratively and sharing craft traditions, participants will break down ethnic barriers and promote mutual understanding. The creative environment nurtured within Threads of Transformation fosters dialogue and cooperation, helping to strengthen community ties across tribal lines.

The traditional crafts and repurposed military garments will also support environmental sustainability. Many South Sudanese crafts are made using locally sourced, natural, or recycled materials such as palm leaves and repurposed metal. By encouraging these practices, Threads of Transformation not only preserves cultural heritage but also aligns with environmentally conscious production methods that benefit both people and planet.

Ultimately, the integration of traditional crafts into Threads of Transformation in Adjumani enriches the existing program and ensures it resonates deeply with the community. It transforms fashion into a platform for healing, reconciliation, and sustainable livelihoods—empowering individuals to honour their roots while building a more inclusive and hopeful future together.

The Uganda Program Begins



In November 2025, the Threads of Transformation program was relaunched, welcoming five women from South Sudan who are currently living in the Adjumani Settlements of northern Uganda. Under the guidance of Ms. Saskia Lenaerts, the cohort began a four-week intensive program designed to strengthen tailoring skills, introduce new design methodologies, explore the creative process and build pathways toward economic independence.

The program places a renewed emphasis on innovation, sustainability, and market-aligned product development. Over the four weeks, participants will learn advanced tailoring techniques, experiment with new sources of materials, and explore how to incorporate repurposed textiles into their work, an approach that supports both creativity and resource efficiency.

Each participant brings a unique skillset to the cohort, ranging from crochet and knitting to tailoring. These diverse strengths allow the women to rely on one another throughout the program, fostering peer-to-peer learning, stronger collaboration, and shared problem-solving. This collective approach enhances their ability to design and produce higher-quality products while also building confidence in their own expertise. A central component of the program is collaborative product development. The women will work together to create a prototype with strong potential for future scaling and marketability beyond the region. This shared design process reinforces teamwork and a sense of joint ownership, contributing to long-term economic resilience.

Early impact was evident during the first session, when participants remarked that they had never considered reusing or reimagining existing garments, such as transforming a single pair of pants into multiple new items, or experimenting with new fabrics. This shift in perspective marks an important step in expanding their creative capacity and understanding of value creation within the tailoring industry.

The 2025 Uganda location of Threads of Transformation represents a meaningful step forward in supporting displaced women as they develop skills, confidence, and viable economic opportunities. As the cohort progresses through the program and their prototype evolves, the foundations for future income generation and community-level impact continue to strengthen.

Shared Insights & Looking Ahead



Across both Goma and Adjumani, Threads of Transformation has generated meaningful insights that strengthen the future of the program:

- Creative processes help reduce emotional inhibition, opening pathways for healing and rebuilding confidence.
- Collaborative exercises foster trust and social cohesion, particularly among individuals from communities divided by conflict.
- Participants in both locations had never considered old garments or discarded fabrics as valuable raw materials, revealing a significant opportunity for future training in sustainable design, cost-saving production methods, and resource efficiency.
- Introducing the concept of repurposing materials sparked curiosity, reinforcing that innovation does not depend on expensive equipment but on mindset, experimentation, and creativity.
- Flexibility and adaptability are essential for operating in conflict-affected regions, and the program's pivot from the DRC to Uganda demonstrated the importance of responsible decision-making and community-led adjustments.

These insights guide our evolving approach as the program continues to grow.

Looking ahead, BBS will:

- Support the current Adjumani cohort as they finalise their prototype
- Explore opportunities for small-scale production or market testing
- Continue monitoring conditions in the DRC and look for ways to support the six apprentices
- Use the documentary to raise awareness and engage new supporters
- Strengthen the integration of traditional crafts and sustainable design practices

Threads of Transformation will continue to adapt responsibly while staying anchored in its core mission: empowering individuals affected by conflict through creativity, collaboration, and opportunity.

Saskia Lenaerts Profile



Saskia Lenaerts is a fashion designer, maker, and lecturer whose work explores the social potential of clothing and the power of repurposing as a tool for cultural dialogue. A 2020 graduate of the Central Saint Martins MA Fashion (Menswear) with Distinction and a L'Oréal Scholar (2019–2020), she is recognised for her thoughtful, purposeful approach to design. In 2018, she received the Considered Design Award at Graduate Fashion Week, presented by Johnstons of Elgin, affirming her commitment to ethical, future-facing fashion.

Saskia is the founder of SASKIA, a socially pertinent fashion label that reframes garments with difficult or “brutal” pasts, transforming them into symbols of acceptance and resilience. Her collections highlight both cultural differences and shared human narratives, creating celebratory juxtapositions that challenge conventional perspectives on clothing and identity.

Alongside her independent practice, Saskia is a Lecturer in Fashion at Kingston University, where she has taught since 2022, sharing her expertise in design thinking, construction, and socially engaged fashion.

Her industry experience spans luxury houses, contemporary brands, and performance-focused costume design. She has worked as a Menswear Designer at Alexander McQueen, a Men's Accessories Designer at Burberry, and a Costume Designer for organisations including Factory International and 180 The Strand, notably designing for Ivan Blackstock's Traplord in collaboration with Sadler's Wells and the Manchester International Festival. Since 2020, she has also served as a Freelance Design Consultant for Peace by Piece International, contributing to cross-cultural, ethically grounded design initiatives.

Driven, ambitious, and deeply dedicated to her craft, Saskia brings a global perspective supported by her multilingual background and diverse professional experiences. Her work consistently champions diversity, sustainability, and purposeful innovation, with a particular focus on ethical practices and the creative reimagining of existing materials.

Through her teaching, her label, and her international collaborations, Saskia Lenaerts continues to shape a more inclusive, conscious, and culturally connected landscape for contemporary fashion.

Local Nonprofit Partner Profiles



Remember Youth for Change (DRC)

Since 2016, Remember Youth for Change (RYC) has served as a lifeline for young people living amid one of the world's longest-running conflicts. Based in Eastern DRC, RYC focuses on trauma recovery, vocational training, and community reintegration for former child soldiers and war-affected youth.

RYC's holistic model combines mental health support with practical skills training in carpentry, tailoring, agriculture, and literacy. This integrated approach rebuilds confidence, restores dignity, and helps young people reintegrate as valued members of their communities. For younger children, RYC uses a play-based therapeutic model to support emotional regulation and strengthen social bonds through a "kids helping kids" methodology. Through its long-term commitment to accompaniment rather than short-term intervention, RYC has helped hundreds of young people reclaim their futures, demonstrating the power of community-led healing in regions devastated by violence.

SPEAK Uganda

SPEAK is a youth-led nonprofit working in South Sudan and Uganda to address the intertwined challenges of inter-tribal conflict, displacement, and chronic poverty. Recognising that peace cannot thrive without economic opportunity, and vice versa, SPEAK uses a dual approach that combines peacebuilding initiatives with livelihood development.

Their peacebuilding work includes dialogue forums such as Take Tea Together and the Centre for Mediation and Conflict Transformation, where community members unpack grievances, rebuild trust, and challenge harmful stereotypes. Their livelihood programs provide fishing equipment, agricultural tools, training in climate-smart farming, and financial literacy. In Uganda's Ayilo I Refugee Settlement, SPEAK brings together South Sudanese women from diverse tribes to farm collaboratively, transforming shared agricultural spaces into arenas for healing, reconciliation, and economic stability.

Complementary Strengths, Shared Impact

Together, RYC and SPEAK Uganda offer powerful examples of how community-based organisations can break cycles of trauma and division. RYC's trauma-focused youth reintegration model and SPEAK's peacebuilding livelihoods approach complement one another by addressing both emotional recovery and economic resilience.

Both organisations demonstrate that sustainable peace requires more than humanitarian response, it requires creativity, opportunity, and safe spaces where individuals can rebuild trust while rebuilding their lives.

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