

**DISABILITY AND AID**  
**An Ethnography of Logics and Practices of Distribution**  
**in a Ugandan Refugee Camp**

*Maria-Theres Schuler. 2024. Leiden, Boston: Brill.*

The book *Disability and Aid: An Ethnography of Logics and Practices of Distribution in a Ugandan Refugee Camp* by Maria-Theres Schuler conceptualizes the predicaments of humanitarian aid, particularly as championed through global aid regimes and experienced by refugees. It problematizes the concepts of humanitarianism, refugee, migration, and disability based on rigorous ethnographic research in the form of participant observation and narrative interviews conducted in the Kyangwali refugee settlement in Uganda.

The monograph is thematically divided into three parts and eight chapters, whereby the author amplifies stories of her interlocutors through a case study method in each chapter. While the introductory section provides conceptual clarity, the subsequent chapters present disability and humanitarian aid from structural, material/physical, social, and emotional perspectives. As such, Schuler argues that disability extends beyond a physical aspect affecting a person's wellbeing and rather constitutes structural, social, and emotional constraints hindering one's ability to enjoy socio-economic and political opportunities.

In describing and analysing the stories of her interlocutors, Schuler employs a unique writing style by blending storytelling and narrative descriptions that take readers to the physical and emotional lives of the refugees. In addition to its methodological rigour, the author's commitment to ethical principles, especially notions of respect for research participants, is evident throughout the book. The monograph unveils the voices of marginalized groups—refugees, disabled people, and displaced persons based on carefully selected case studies and life stories.

Conceptually, the book addresses three key themes: Firstly, Schuler conceptualizes humanitarian aid as a spectacle displayed as performative practices to legitimize interventions. Secondly, the notion of asymmetrical power relations between aid workers and refugees, which reinforces patron-client relationships, is a key argument in the book. Thirdly, refugees' ambivalent situations in terms of negotiating lost homes and new settlement places are presented through narrative stories. After elaborating on each of these debates, I will end the review by posing some reflections on whether humanitarian aid enhances capabilities.

In the introductory section, Schuler shows how humanitarian aid organizations use performative practices to create "success stories" about their interventions. An example of an event organized to celebrate project completion by Aid Global shows the organization's strategies of marketing, publicizing, and spectacularizing its interventions. Schuler argues, "[t]he event's format and procedure – the speeches, the guests, the waiting and the cameras – signified that the project had been a success." (p. 2). On the contrary, accounts from "beneficiaries" show that this "success story" is not commonly shared among disabled refugee people in the camp, but rather their expectations, experiences, and continued marginalization through the humanitarian aid regime are quite different from the success narratives from aid organizations. I link this to what Didier Fassin discusses in criticizing humanitarian aid

for often becoming a “spectacle,” where Western countries and organizations focus on their visibility and success instead of empowering local communities (Fassin 2013).

By presenting empirically divergent viewpoints on the story of “success,” Schuler argues that while aid organizations consider people’s enrolment into a certain program, attendance of meetings or trainings as a success, the people with disabilities assess success whether the aid program strengthens their material and emotional wellbeing and social connections. These divergent views on the story of “success” remind us of James Ferguson’s seminal work on development interventions in Lesotho in the 1980s, which he framed as “the successful failure” (Ferguson 1994). “Successful failure” signifies the self-reproducing logic of development even under situations of practical failure—by constructing “success stories” or achieving goals other than those originally intended. While Ferguson’s case study illustrates state consolidation of power through development interventions, the construction of “success” through performative aid practices, as Schuler describes, legitimizes the logic of aid and its distribution. Under such an oxymoron—humanitarian aid’s self-reproducing logic of “successful failure,” the apparent “beneficiaries” remain in the aid trap, whereas the system continues its self-reproducing project.

Through the study of mundane and structural relations between aid workers and recipients, Schuler unmaskes unequal power relations embedded within humanitarian aid, whereby aid organizations and aid workers gain more power due to their institutional and material resources. This asymmetry is exacerbated in contexts of refugees and people with disabilities due to their vulnerabilities. However, these unequal power relations are mediated through a patron–client approach in which both parties rely on each other. While aid organizations need the refugees’ attendance at trainings and meetings and their compliance with the aid distribution logic for reporting to donors, the refugees rely on aid organizations and aid workers for their basic needs. Beyond the traditional patron–client relation that shapes political authority, Schuler borrows Ferguson’s concept of distributive labour to describe how people who don’t have resources claim the “right” to get it through their patrons (Ferguson 2015). Distributive labour generates and sustains social relations by enabling people’s claims to resources and, at the same time, coalescing their interdependence.

Through the life stories and memories of the refugees, the book takes readers not only to the refugee camps and resettlement sites but also to the rugged terrains of migration routes that (dis)connect refugees from/to their previous homes. While the material and socio-cultural deprivation in the refugee camps are day-to-day experiences that signify their disconnection from home, the refugees also experience the breakup of social networks and family disintegration. Such a conundrum prompts refugees to depend on aid organizations, exacerbating their submission to enrollment into the patron–client relationship. However, in navigating new circumstances, refugees create new forms of social support systems built on African traditions of humanity, although this is not explicitly articulated as such in the book. For example, under the title “Care for People Who Cannot Help Themselves” (Chapter 4) Schuller succinctly discusses the story of Mama Doretti’s unreserved support for Vitali—a refugee with a serious disability case. This support is not based on reciprocity, nor was it built on a patron–client relationship. Rather, it exemplifies the creation of new social support systems extending familyhood beyond kinship.

Furthermore, the book unpacks the predicaments of humanitarian aid—the necessity of solving people’s immediate needs such as food, shelter, and basic equipment on the one hand, and its inability to transform people’s capabilities on the other. In this regard, although Schuler is not critical of aid organizations’ inability or lack of readiness to fundamentally transform the life of the refugees, I argue that the humanitarian aid that Schuler studied failed to serve as a transformative technology in building the people’s capabilities through what Amartya Sen calls “development as freedom” (Sen 1999). This could be due to the author’s positionality or lack of interest in the field of critical development studies. Yet, a reader can grasp the mismatches between humanitarian aid’s apparent commitment to solving immediate problems facing refugees, on the one hand, and its unintended consequences in creating dependency, on the other hand. For example, one of Schuler’s interlocutors states, “[t]hey [aid workers] just come and register us, they are writing reports, but there is no value for a disabled person in this” (p. 69). This shows the inability of the training programs to enhance people’s skills and knowledge to improve their lives. By pushing this line of argument through a critical lens, further research on humanitarian interventions of this type may contribute to policy debates and practices. Another gap in the book is the lack of situating the debates within African studies and postcolonial debates to make sense of unequal power relations and the continuity of creating dependency through humanitarianism.

In general, the book offers nuanced stories and ethnographic case studies generated through an appropriate methodological approach and analytical rigour that capture the complex politics of humanitarian aid, its predicaments, unequal power relations, and the challenges refugees encounter due to double precarity – refugee and disability status. The book is highly relevant for migration, refugee, disability, humanitarian, and development studies.

### References

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