BOOK REVIEWS

Ulrike Krause, Gato Ndabaramiye Joshua, And Hannah Schmidt, *Refugee- Led Organizations In Uganda Agency, Gender, And Politics Of Self- Organizing In Exile,* Montreal & Kingston: Mcgill-Queen's University Press, 2026, ISBN 978-0-2280-2695-2, 326 Pages

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Much of the academic literature on refugees focuses on the causes of forced displacement, asylum policies and legal protection, or the way refugees are portrayed in political discourse. The book briefly reviewed here- *Refugee- Led Organizations in Uganda Agency, Gender, and Politics of Self- Organizing in Exile* -explores another side of the refugee experience: how refugees organize themselves to cope with the challenges of life in exile. The book's case study is the Republic of Uganda, an East African country with approximately 1.8 million refugees, being thus among the countries hosting the largest number of displaced people worldwide, according with UNHCR. The country has adopted a legal framework that recognizes refugees' fundamental rights: "…Uganda grants refugees fundamental rights, including freedom of movement, employment opportunities, and access to vital public services like education and health care – at least on paper" (p. 7). In practice, however, the exercise of these rights is often limited.

The authors, Ulrike Krause, Gato Ndabaramiye Joshua, and Hannah Schmidt, focus their analysis primarily on the experiences of refugees in two areas in Uganda, seeking to understand how refugees organize their daily lives, provide mutual support, and respond to the challenges they encounter in the host country: Kyaka II, a refugee settlement located in a rural area, inhabited primarily by people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and Kampala, the capital of Uganda, where refugees from various countries, including Somalia, Congo, but also Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, reside. The fieldwork in the two areas included 163 refugees representing various status groups (92 women and 71 men), who took part in 31 focus group discussions. The book is organized into seven chapters, dedicated to the functioning and impacts of the regime, the political engagement of formalized self-organizations in the regime, the social integration of individuals and self-organizations, and self-organized socio-economic practices and networks, alongside the introductory, conceptual, and concluding chapters.

A central concept of the book is *agency*, understood as the capacity for action, the ability of individuals to take initiative, make choices, and influence their own living conditions, even when faced with various constraints. The authors employ the perspective of "relational agency,… which provides the analytical lens for examining the multi-faceted meanings of refugees' self-organization" (p. 30). According to this view, individuals do not act in isolation; rather, they act through social relationships, past experiences, available resources, and acquired knowledge. Refugees draw upon their experiences and knowledge to identify solutions, organize their

activities, and assist others. For instance, individuals who have passed through similar experiences may share information regarding obtaining documentation, accessing medical services, finding employment, or starting a small business. Self-organization, therefore, is not merely a reaction to a crisis; it is also a form of collective initiative through which refugees seek to shape their social and economic environment. The authors emphasize, however, that this capacity for action should not be idealized: the possibilities available to individuals vary depending on their resources, social position, power dynamics, and personal experiences.

An important issue addressed by the book is how the policies of the Ugandan state and the humanitarian system influence the lives of refugees. Uganda promotes the concept of *self-reliance*, the autonomy of refugees and their capacity to support themselves. Within the camps, this approach encourages agriculture, group labor, and collective economic initiatives. Although these policies aim to foster autonomy, people often remain dependent on humanitarian aid and face a lack of sufficient resources. Refugees are often encouraged to form groups to facilitate the implementation of aid programs, but they do not always have real control over decisions. The authors distinguish between groups influenced by the authorities and organizations created and run autonomously by refugees. Refugee-led organizations (RLOs) provide a wide range of services, including: legal counseling and information on asylum procedures; support for new arrivals, including assistance with finding housing; psychological counseling and support for those affected by trauma; language classes and vocational training; support for accessing education and medical services; initiatives for gender equality and combating gender-based violence etc. These organizations have firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by their communities, but their work is often burdened by limited resources or difficulties in obtaining official registration.

A relevant argument of the book (chapter 5) is that self-organization is not limited to formal organizations. Family, friends, neighbors, and informal groups often serve as the primary sources of support for refugees. These relationships can provide food, temporary shelter, information, emotional support, and protection in emergency situations. Forced displacement can destroy existing family and community ties and refugees can build in exile new relationships that offer them a sense of belonging, trust, and stability. However, the authors avoid portraying the community as inherently protective. Close relationships can also become sources of pressure, conflict, or abuse. Domestic violence and gender-based violence can occur, including within families and social groups. Formal organizations can intervene when these relationships no longer provide protection, by offering counseling, information, and other forms of support. The message of this chapter is that informal solidarity and formal organizations complement one another, both being essential to the daily lives of refugees.

The book also examines how refugees seek to generate income and improve their economic situation (chapter 6). Given that jobs and resources are limited, they appeal to various individual and collective strategies: agricultural and commercial activities; buying and reselling products; providing services; developing small joint businesses etc. Social networks facilitate access to information, capital, customers, and commercial opportunities. For instance, connections between refugees in Kyaka II and those in Kampala contribute to the movement of goods and the development of commercial activities. The authors explain that these relationships serve important functions: they reduce economic risks, facilitate the transfer of practical knowledge, and create opportunities for others. However, participating in such initiatives is not an option for everyone. Some savings groups require regular financial contributions, which effectively

excludes those who lack the necessary funds, while other organizations charge fees for courses or services. Furthermore, these economic activities may involve poorly paid labor, unsafe working conditions, and financial risks. But overall, "individuals and their self-organizations contribute to a more varied economic landscape than the humanitarian one furnished by self-reliance based on agriculture. And even more, through these forms of self-organization they become the first responders in times of need as well as key providers in everyday life in exile" (p. 246).

The final chapter synthesizes the research findings and discusses the risks associated with the insufficient recognition of refugee-led organizations, underlying several major issues. The first is the shifting of responsibility. If humanitarian institutions assume that refugee organizations can fill all the gaps in the protection system, the responsibility for service provision risks being transferred to communities that lack sufficient resources. The second *is tokenistic participation*. Organizations may be invited to take part in meetings and projects without having any real influence over decisions. This form of participation, known as *tokenism*, creates the appearance of inclusion without resulting in an actual redistribution of power. The third is recognition without adequate support. Although refugee organizations have demonstrated their ability to respond rapidly to community needs, they continue to face a lack of funding, administrative barriers, and difficulties in gaining recognition as legitimate partners. The authors argue that refugee-led organizations should be treated as autonomous actors with their own experience and knowledge, rather than merely as intermediaries for the implementation of humanitarian policies.

Overall, the book offers a critical perspective on the humanitarian system and demonstrates that the lives of refugees cannot be understood solely through the lens of vulnerability and dependence on humanitarian aid. Refugees draw upon their experiences, social relationships, and available resources to build their own systems of protection, solidarity, and economic subsistence. It convey the message that refugees should be recognized not merely as recipients of protection, but as active participants in shaping it. For this participation to be genuine, their organizations must have access to resources, be involved in decision-making processes, and be able to maintain their autonomy and to contribute to the refugees' future.