



BRILL

Winner of the Mattingly Prize, 2019:
Sam de Schutter, PhD candidate, *Institute for History, Leiden University*

How did you get into your current research field?

When studying history and anthropology in Ghent and Leuven, I did my research and fieldwork in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Basing my research on sources from Congo rather than the official archives in Belgium or Europe definitely shaped my thinking and research practices. I took that experience with me in my current project. Through a colleague in Belgium I got to know about Monika Baar's Rethinking Disability project in Leiden. I applied, got the job and was then tasked to set out a project of my own. The Rethinking Disability project zooms in on the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) and thus also on the UN as an important actor in shaping global disability policies. Focusing on Kenya and Tanzania, I quickly discovered that development and technical assistance were the key concepts in the UN's involvement in shaping disability policies and interventions in these countries. Using the archives of international organisations like the ILO and the WHO in conjunction with Kenyan and Tanzanian archives forcibly brought to the fore how the project of development was just as much an international project as it was a national one, and that the ways in which that impinged upon the lives of disabled Kenyans and Tanzanians had to be studied from a transnational perspective.

What have been the main challenges for the kind of research that you do?

Among historians working on disability, it is by now a commonly held truth that disability is just as much a valuable category of analysis than race, class or gender. Yet for other historians, it still appears as somewhat of a niche topic. To have a serious analysis of disability and at the same time make the point that this analysis is just as much a contribution to the history of international organisations and development can therefore be difficult. Getting my research out in a journal on diplomatic history, as part of an edited volume on international observances and the UN, is thus a great opportunity to mainstream disability within other fields of history. To receive a prize for that article is of course all the more rewarding and it will hopefully help in establishing disability even more firmly as a valuable topic of research.

Did the article for *Diplomatica* make you think differently about your research?

*It did. I never imagined myself writing for a journal about diplomatic history, because I never saw myself as doing diplomatic history. Presenting my work at the Conference of the New Diplomatic History Network in Middelburg in 2018 and subsequently turning that paper into an article for *Diplomatica* did however change my view about what diplomatic history is - or what it can be. That consequently made me look at my own research in a different light. It was interesting to reflect on issues of technical assistance and interventions in disability policies as diplomatic acts, and technical experts and international organizations as diplomatic actors. It allows, among other things, to think through the inherently political nature of what was being sold as purely 'technical' assistance, and the ways in which technical experts moved and manoeuvred within the political landscape of the nations to which they were detached.*

Read the article (in Open Access): [A Global Approach to Local Problems?](#)