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Rights for the World's Children: Rädsla Barnen and the Making of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

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ABSTRACT

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) from 1989 remains the most widely ratified treaty on human rights and functions as a normative frame for myriads of actors working to promote the rights of children. The scholarship on the convention recognises that non-governmental organisations were crucial to the drafting of the treaty. Some of these accounts also single out the Swedish Save the Children Federation (Rädsla Barnen) as significant for facilitating non-governmental cooperation and shaping the drafting group discussions. Drawing on archival and published first-hand sources, the paper adds to the available accounts, first by outlining some of the developments that led Rädsla Barnen to embrace the concept of children's rights in the 1970s and become involved in drafting of UNCRC in the 1980s. The paper then reveals how the organisation engaged creatively with the concept of children's rights in the drafting process and succeeded in framing children in armed conflict and female genital mutilation as rights issues, effectively challenging some of the conventional boundaries of international human rights law. But the paper also points to the limits of Rädsla Barnen's influence and suggests that its creative engagement took place within a relatively conventional framework of child protection.

KEYWORDS

Children's rights; Save the Children; Rädsla Barnen; UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; history of human rights

In March 1989, the UN Commission on Human Rights concluded negotiations on what would become the world's major international treaty on the human rights of children: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Meeting at the UN headquarters in Geneva, delegates from all continents took turns to hail the outcome and applaud those who had worked for its completion. The Swedish representative Anders Rönquist spoke on behalf of all Nordic countries, pledging their commitment to the treaty, which they viewed as 'an important complement' to already established human rights standards since it would '... grant to each child his or her own individual rights'.¹

Looking back at the decade-long negotiation process, Rönquist acknowledged the contributions of the Polish government, which had initiated the project in 1978 and had presided over it ever since. But he saved his biggest accolade for the so-called NGO Ad Hoc Group on

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¹National Archives of Sweden, Arninge (henceforth NAS), Swedish Mission to the United Nations in Geneva, F1c, Vol 4, Hp 48, M3, 'Draft Statement of the Nordic Countries to the UN Commission on Human Rights', 5 March 1989. For more on how Nordic states engaged in the drafting of the UNCRC, see Vik and Østberg in this issue.

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the Convention on the Rights of the Child (henceforth the NGO Group) – an informal gathering of child welfare and human rights organisations with consultative status, which, starting in 1983, had decided to coordinate their drafting activities. ‘Having myself had the privilege to participate in the [negotiations]’, Rönquist concluded, ‘I can assure the Commission that the non-governmental organisations always have reminded the governmental experts, when the discussion has tended to be too legalistic, that we were dealing with the realities of children of the world’. And among the 20 or so non-governmental groups (the membership shifted constantly), there was one organisation that Rönquist had worked particularly closely with, namely Rädde Barnen (the Swedish Save the Children Federation).²

Since 1989, both scholarly and anecdotal accounts have recognised the significance of the NGO Group in the making of the child rights convention. Political scientists have found it a useful case for evaluating theories of how NGOs navigate the institutional structures of the United Nations.³ The few historians who have shown an interest in the convention have also suggested that non-governmental actors were crucial in moving the negotiations forward.⁴ Several of these accounts have singled out Rädde Barnen as one of the NGO Group’s most active and significant members. The literature occasionally provides vivid descriptions of the organisation’s annual dinner parties, where state and non-state delegates would chat informally over traditional Swedish pea-soup and punsch.⁵ More substantial studies also note how Rädde Barnen advanced an understanding of childhood as a ‘neutral zone of peace’, and, in close cooperation with the Swedish UN delegation, promoted language against the use of child soldiers.⁶

But the available accounts only get us so far. In spite of their distinct merits, they do not allow for a deeper understanding of how Rädde Barnen came to embrace the concept of children’s rights in the first place. Nor do they allow us to make sense of how Rädde Barnen’s use of this concept related to its broader objectives and concerns in this particular period. Furthermore, the literature does not allow us to discern how it was that Rädde Barnen, which after all was not an international NGO but a Swedish child welfare organisation, was allowed to participate in the making of what would evolve into the most widely ratified international treaty on human rights.

Drawing on both archival and published first-hand sources from the 1970s through to the early 1990s,⁷ this paper seeks to address such gaps in the scholarship on the non-governmental organisations’ involvement in the negotiations on the UNCRC. The first section

²Ibid. This paper uses the Swedish name Rädde Barnen, which is in keeping with how the organisation presented itself in international settings in the 1970s and 1980s.

³Anna Holzscheiter, *Children’s Rights in International Politics: The Transformative Power of Discourse* (Palgrave Macmillan 2010) 93.

⁴See e.g. Zoe Moody, *Les droits de l’enfant: Genèse, institutionnalisation et diffusion, 1924–1989* (Éditions Alphil–Presses universitaires suisses 2016).

⁵Cynthia Price Cohen, ‘The Role of Non-governmental Organizations in the Drafting of the Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (1990) 12 *Human Rights Quarterly* 135, n 32. See also Simone Ek, *Självklat barnets rättigheter* (Rädde Barnen 2009) 39.

⁶Holzscheiter, *Children’s Rights in International Politics*, 163, 207; Paula S Fass, ‘A Historical Context for the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child’ (2011) 633(1) *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 17.

⁷The analysis is based on unpublished archival sources from Rädde Barnen (1975–1990), Defence for Children International (1981–1989), and the Swedish UN missions to Geneva and New York (1985–1989). It also draws on Rädde Barnen’s official publications (including its in-house magazine, *Barnen & Vi*, between 1978 and 1989), in so far as they shed light on the organisation’s engagement with children’s rights and involvement in the drafting of the UNCRC. The final two sections are partly based on the official UN records from the drafting process, which have been published in *Legislative History of the Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2007).

concentrates on how Rädde Barnen refashioned itself as a child rights organisation in the late 1970s. The second outlines some of the contingent factors – including frictions within the wider international Save the Children movement – that paved the way for Rädde Barnen's involvement in the drafting process. The ensuing sections focus on the organisation's participation in the negotiations, and above all its campaigns to ban the use of child soldiers and to combat female genital mutilation.

Although narrow in its scope, the paper speaks to some of the broader issues that we identified in the introduction to this special issue on the histories of human rights in the Nordic countries. Above all, it can be read as an attempt to nuance the common but poorly documented assumption that Nordic state and civil society actors have a deep history of active involvement in the development of international human rights law.⁸ While this paper spotlights a case that seems to fit perfectly into a narrative of the Nordic countries as fountainheads of international human rights norms, it also calls this narrative into question. It primarily does so by stressing how Rädde Barnen's participation in the treaty-making process owed more to contingent factors than its principled commitment to children's rights. Furthermore, it notes how Rädde Barnen's contribution to the drafting was limited to a few specific issues. And even then, or at least in the case of children in armed conflict, Rädde Barnen managed to influence the discussions, without affecting the outcome document. This points to a challenge facing future scholars concerned with the roles played by state and non-state actors in the making of international human rights law. Human rights declarations and treaties are essentially patchworks of very different norms. To the extent that it is even possible to reconstruct the evolution of such instruments, we should avoid taking the involvement of particular actors in the debates of particular articles as proof that they were essential for the project as a whole.⁹

The paper draws on an approach to the study of human rights in history that focuses on the situational appropriation of human rights language. As scholars like Lorrin Thomas have successfully demonstrated, this perspective allows us to highlight how particular actors take on human rights discourse for both idealistic and strategic purposes, at the same time shaping and reshaping the content of that discourse within specific contexts.¹⁰ In this vein, the first two sections reveal how Rädde Barnen first engaged with the concept of children's rights to legitimise both its strengthened cooperation with UN agencies, as well as its involvement in political reform processes to combat child abuse in Sweden. The final two sections then reveal how Rädde Barnen's representatives, once they had entered the negotiations on the UNCRC, engaged creatively with the notion of children's human rights to make the convention speak to what they – given their specific perspectives and ongoing cooperation with other actors – perceived as the central, global challenges to children's basic needs and well-being.

From Relief to Rights

In February 1979, a few weeks into the International Year of the Child, Sweden's most prolific child welfare organisation, Rädde Barnen, announced that it was opening shop

⁸See also the introduction to this special issue.

⁹See also Linde Lindkvist, *Religious Freedom and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Cambridge University Press 2017).

¹⁰Lorrin Thomas, 'When We Talk about Human Rights' (2015) 6 *Humanity Journal* 337.

in Geneva. The announcement came in connection to the inauguration of an exhibition of children's drawings at the *Palais des Nations*, an exhibition curated by a chapter president of a local Rädga Barnen association in Stockholm.¹¹ One of the speakers at the ceremony was the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and former Danish Prime Minister, Poul Hartling. In his speech, Hartling acknowledged his agency's close ties to this Swedish NGO – which at that point included efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the 'boat people' of Vietnam and child refugees in Eastern Africa. He concluded by suggesting that Rädga Barnen, apart from being a 'pioneer' of '... imaginative ideas to help children', played an essential part in mobilising Swedish opinion in favour of foreign aid, particularly with regards to refugee children.¹²

After Hartling spoke Kerstin Anér – a literary critic, Liberal member of the Swedish Parliament, and Rädga Barnen's chairman since 1978. Anér suggested that the opening of a Geneva office was part and parcel of her organisation's more general transformation from a national charity group to a modern development NGO with close links to international agencies like UNHCR and UNICEF. She went on to describe this shift as both a new chapter in the organisation's international work and a return to the ideals that had once inspired the birth of the Save the Children movement. Anér pointed to Eglantyne Jebb and Dorothy Buxton who had established the UK-based Save the Children Fund in 1919 and had inspired a group of prominent Swedish pacifists and feminists – including Elin Wägner, Anna-Lenah Elgström and Ellen W Palmstierna – to set up the sister organisation Rädga Barnen later the same year.¹³ Crucially, she also described them as pioneers of children's rights. 'These women were not sentimental nor, in the usual sense of the word, charitable ladies', Anér asserted.

They worked to help destitute children in postwar Vienna, Germany, in their own countries, soon in many other countries. But they did not talk exclusively of charity. From the very beginning, they spoke of rights, of solidarity, of social duties, of help to self-help. They are no grandmothers to be ashamed of.¹⁴

As Anér made clear, the main point of establishing an international Rädga Barnen office – independently from umbrella groups like the International Union of Child Welfare – was that it would provide improved access to international agencies and like-minded international NGOs. But she also imagined that such an office would allow her organisation to influence international discourse on child welfare and children's rights, 'to act as a pressure group, a moulder of opinion, an ombudsman for the children of the world'. This too, Anér claimed, was in keeping with the legacy of the early Save the Children movement, and its successful work to craft and promote the so-called Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child in the 1920s. This five-point declaration – which was promulgated by the League of Nations in 1924 – has later been canonised as the first international declaration, not only on children's rights but on human rights more broadly. To Anér, the Geneva Declaration expressed a '... vision of the world's children as the supreme good of the earth'. More important, it exemplified what the Save the Children organisations could

¹¹Sylvia Lindström and others, *Tree of Life: The World Through the Eyes of Children* (Rädga Barnen 1987).

¹²NAS, Rädga Barnen (henceforth RB), F1 c 21, 'Swedish Voluntary Organisation Appoints Ombudsman for Children in Southern Africa, Also Opens Geneva Office', 9 February 1979.

¹³For more on Swedish Rädga Barnen in this period, see Lina Sturfelt, 'Visualizing War Victims: Rädga Barnen's Humanitarian Reporting in the Interwar Years' in Lina Sturfelt and Marie Cronqvist (eds), *War Remains* (Nordic Academic Press 2018).

¹⁴NAS, RB, F1 c21, Kerstin Anér, 'Address in Geneva', 9 February 1979.

accomplish if they succeeded in channelling their experiences from working with destitute children in various places of the world to the discussions in the conference rooms of international organisations.¹⁵

Anér's speech provides a window onto the discourse of Rädga Barnen's leadership in the late 1970s. Above all, it showcases how the establishment of an international office and the simultaneous embrace of rights language were justified both as a step forward and as a return to an original mission. Håkan Landelius, Rädga Barnen's Secretary General, made a similar point in an unpublished piece summarising the first 60 years of the organisation's history. In the beginning, Landelius claimed, Rädga Barnen focused almost exclusively on providing disaster relief to women and children affected by widespread famine in Eastern and Central Europe after 1919. The Geneva Declaration gave international recognition of these efforts in the language of rights, but by this point, many also thought that the organisation had fulfilled its task and should be disbanded. After 1925, Rädga Barnen all but disappeared from the map of Swedish organisational life. It was only with the outbreak of World War II in 1939 that it '... assumed a definite shape as a popular movement' and as a channel for official and voluntary humanitarian aid, mainly to other Nordic countries and, after 1945, to continental Europe. From the early 1950s, Rädga Barnen then gradually 'discovered the Third World', providing emergency assistance to children affected by acute famine (including in Biafra in the late 1960s and Bangladesh in the mid-1970s) and launching some long-term preventive care projects like programmes to combat leprosy and tuberculosis in Ethiopia and Yemen. The 1970s, Landelius concluded, saw both stronger attention to issues of social exclusion and child abuse in Sweden, and a 'revival' of '... the serious ideas of our founders', including the commitment to promote the 'child's right' (sic). The bottom line was that children's rights were not a constant theme in Rädga Barnen's history, but a lost ideal, which the organisation had only recently rediscovered.¹⁶

Recent scholarly works on Rädga Barnen's history have upheld the contours of this narrative. In her meticulous study of the organisation's activities between the late 1930s and mid-1950s, Ann Nehlin shows how Rädga Barnen's humanitarian work was based on a 'Nordic prerogative'. Children and families in Sweden's neighbouring countries were singled out as prioritised recipients of aid, and the objective was – more or less explicitly – to generate goodwill for Sweden as a nation, especially after its inaction during World War II. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, as Rädga Barnen's aid work expanded beyond the Nordic countries, such justifications were often blended with talk of helping children become 'democratically oriented citizens'. Although this discursive shift was in keeping with the message of the Geneva Declaration, there is no indication that it involved any direct engagement with the concept of rights.¹⁷

¹⁵Ibid. For more on the origins of the Geneva Declaration, see Dominique Marshall, 'The Construction of Children as an Object of International Relations: The Declaration of Children's Rights and the Child Welfare Committee of League of Nations, 1900–1924' (1999) 7 *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 134. For the wider human rights context, see Paul Gordon Lauren, *The Evolution of International Human Rights: Visions Seen* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2011) 120.

¹⁶NAS, RB, F1 c 21, Håkan Landelius, 'The History of an Idea in Action', undated (1979–1982).

¹⁷Ann Nehlin, 'Exporting Visions and Saving Children: The Swedish Save the Children Fund' (PhD diss, Linköping University 2009) 180. See also Elin Clason, *Rädga Barnen och barnets rättigheter i historiskt perspektiv, 1919–1994* (Rädga Barnen 1994). For the parallel developments within the British Save the Children Fund, see Patricia Sellick, 'Responding to Children Affected by Armed Conflicts: A Case Study of the Save the Children Fund (1919–1999)' (PhD diss, Bradford University 2001).

It should be noted that Rädde Barnen in the late 1940s supported efforts by the International Union of Child Welfare (IUCW) – at that point the principal umbrella group of the Save the Children organisations – to get the Geneva Declaration readopted by the United Nations. But it took a decade before the UN Commission on Human Rights gave the idea any consideration. As it did so it also thoroughly refashioned the 1924 version of the text, something which IUCW's Secretary General, Georges Thélin, regarded as an assault on the 'moral property' of the Save the Children organisations. At any rate, the promulgation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child in 1959 did not produce any profound discursive change. As Zoe Moody argues, it was only in the late 1970s that the 1959 declaration attracted attention outside of the United Nations and was appropriated as a normative source among non-governmental child welfare organisations.¹⁸

What then was it that prompted Rädde Barnen to turn to the language of children's rights in the 1970s? What was it that led the organisation's representatives to frame their mission, not so much as one of saving children from want and need, but of promoting their rights? To address these questions, we need to take a number of different contexts – international as well as national – into account.

One such context was the general uptake of human rights, at least in Western political discourse. As many scholars have now demonstrated, the 1970s was the time when dedicated human rights movements like Amnesty International and Helsinki Watch (later Human Rights Watch) became significant transnational players. It was also the time when the central UN human rights instruments entered into force, and when Western governments began to deploy human rights as a foreign policy device. While historians continue to grapple over in what ways such trends related to earlier developments, including decolonisation and the crisis of Western socialism, it is now clear that the 1970s was a period in which the language of human rights acquired ever greater political appeal.¹⁹ This was also the case in Sweden, although, as Frida Nilsson has shown, it was only the second half of the 1980s that human rights became an established language in mainstream party politics.²⁰

The heightened salience of human rights in political discourse was also felt among international agencies and NGOs dedicated to the promotion of child welfare. A critical development here was the UN General Assembly's decision to proclaim 1979 as the International Year of the Child and to link this to the twentieth anniversary of the 1959 UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child. Although the connection was mainly a function of timing, it helped to stimulate different efforts to draw closer links between international work related to children and the field of human rights. One example was the creation of Defence for Children International, which tried to utilise similar working methods as Amnesty International, including campaigns to address individual cases of child maltreatment. But the declaration of the IYC was also what sparked the Polish government's

¹⁸Zoe Moody, 'The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959): Genesis, Transformation and Dissemination of a Treaty (Re)constituting a Transnational Cause' (2015) 45 *Prospects* 20. See also Dominique Marshall, 'The Cold War, Canada and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child' in Greg Donaghy (ed), *Canada and the Early Cold War, 1943–1957* (Canadian Government 1998).

¹⁹For an overview of the scholarship on human rights in the 1970s, see Jan Eckel and Samuel Moyn (eds), *The Breakthrough: Human Rights in the 1970s* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2013).

²⁰Frida Nilsson, 'Självklart men oklart. Rättighetsspråk i gymnasieskolans läroplaner 1970–2011' in Malin Arvidsson, Lena Halldenius and Lina Sturfelt (eds), *Mänskliga rättigheter i samhället* (Bokbox 2018).

initiative to table the first draft of the UNCRC in 1978, thus inaugurating the decade-long drafting process. To some extent, it is thus possible to see Rädga Barnen's talk of children's rights as a way of adapting to a language that was gaining currency in the context of international organisations.²¹

But this would be to disregard developments at the national level. In the 1960s and 1970s, children became a focal point of efforts to reshape the Swedish welfare system. It was in this period that many of the flagships of the Swedish model – including generous maternal leave, sickness benefits, housing subsidies and a comprehensive daycare system – were established, not least because of concerns of falling birth rates. At the same time, there was growing scholarly and political attention to the issue of child abuse (a term virtually unknown before the 1960s) and its detrimental effects on children's physical and mental well-being. Sweden had banned corporal punishment in schools in the 1950s and had reformed the criminal code in the 1960s in a way that also covered physical abuse of children in the private sphere. But in the 1970s, there was widespread concern that such reforms were not enough to protect the rights of the child as an individual vis-à-vis families and state institutions. As Bengt Sandin has recently shown, such concerns were not only products of a deep-rooted 'statist individualism' (i.e. the idea of a positive state-individual alliance vis-à-vis collective entities like families and religious bodies) but were also fanned by fears about immigrant communities who might not share the ideals of the Swedish democratic system. Such concerns fed into the 1977 state inquiry on 'The Right of the Child', out of which emerged Sweden's famous anti-spanking legislation of 1979.²²

Rädga Barnen participated actively in these reforms processes. In 1972, the organisation set up Sweden's first Child Ombudsman office.²³ At first, the Ombudsman was a single person, Rigmor von Euler, but it soon evolved into one of Rädga Barnen's principal institutions. Its mission also changed, from an intermediary between individual children and state or municipal agencies to a body dedicated to the production and dissemination of knowledge about children's 'life situation' in Sweden, as well as political advocacy work. From the early 1970s, child abuse in Sweden (including physical punishment, sexual abuse, and, later, violence in mass media) constituted one of the office's main topics.²⁴ Von Euler also took part in the talks on the anti-spanking legislation of 1979, arguing that the family code could serve as a tool for promoting values that she considered central to Swedish democratic culture.²⁵

²¹Moody, *Les droits de l'enfant*, 210–30.

²²Bengt Sandin, 'Children and the Swedish Welfare State: From Different to Similar' in Paula S Fass and Michael Grossberg (eds), *Reinventing Childhood After World War II* (University of Pennsylvania Press 2012) 115, 129–30; Bengt Sandin, 'Barnuppföstran, föräldraskap och barns rättigheter: En studie av diskussionerna kring agalagen 1979' in Victor Lundberg and Cecilia Riving (eds), *Mellan Malmö och Minneapolis: Kulturhistoriska undersökningar tillägnade Lars Edgren* (Arkiv förlag 2018). For more on statist-individualism, see Lars Trägårdh and Lars Svedberg, 'The Iron Law of Rights: Citizenship and Individual Empowerment in Modern Sweden' in Adalbert Evers and Anne-Marie Guillemard (eds), *Social Policy and Citizenship: The Changing Landscape* (Oxford University Press 2013).

²³The evolution of the child ombudsman offices in the Nordic countries is a fascinating, but largely unexplored, area of research. The Swedish case was atypical in that the child ombudsman function was not linked to the state but to non-governmental actors. This changed in 1993, when the current Ombudsman for Children in Sweden was established as a state agency under the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

²⁴For an overview of the activities of Rädga Barnen's Ombudsman office in this period, see Philip E Veerman, *The Rights of the Child and the Changing Image of Childhood* (Martinus Nijhoff 1992) 115.

²⁵Sandin, 'Barnuppföstran, föräldraskap och barns rättigheter' (n 22) 65.

Rädda Barnen officials frequently spoke of the organisation's contributions to such reform processes in terms of children's rights, pointing directly to the newly rediscovered Geneva Declaration of 1924 as an expression of the movement's 'original ideology'. What the declaration embodied, board member Lars H Gustafsson argued in a 1979 piece for the organisation's in-house magazine *Barnen & Vi*, was above all an understanding of children as individual human beings with distinct needs and interests, whose '... integrity and autonomy must be respected'. To this end, it was essential that children enjoyed protection from all forms of violence and abuse, but also, Gustafsson claimed, that their parents and guardians were protected against social and economic exclusion. The question of children's rights, he concluded, '... is ultimately a question of solidarity'. At least in a domestic context, the concept of children's rights proved possible to integrate with a wider commitment to social and economic justice.²⁶

Rädda Barnen's turn to the language of children's rights was thus a consequence of several different trends and developments. First, it was a language that was well-suited to the organisation's increased focus on cooperation with international agencies. In an international context, children's rights could be used to legitimise Rädda Barnen's presence, especially given the legacy of its participation in the making of the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child of 1924. Moreover, children's rights became of interest because they appeared to provide an adequate catch-all language for addressing different forms of child abuse, especially at the domestic level. However, at this point, no one spoke of a child rights convention. Children's rights was a slogan that captured a commitment to promote respect for the child as an individual. But on the verge of the 1980s, it was far from evident that Rädda Barnen would extend this commitment to the codification of children's rights in international human rights law.

The Embrace of Codification

Rädda Barnen's involvement in the drafting of the UNCRC was a consequence of a series of institutional developments that had no direct connection to the rise of child rights discourse in the 1970s. The reasons why Rädda Barnen was able to take active part in the negotiations had much more to do with internal frictions within the wider Save the Children movement than with the organisation's principled commitment to children's rights.

In October 1978, only a few months before the opening of the International Year of the Child, Rädda Barnen decided to withdraw from the International Union of Child Welfare. This was a radical move, not least since Rädda Barnen had been one of the founding members of the IUCW's predecessor, the International Save the Children Union in 1920. In explaining the move to the organisation's members, Håkan Landelius stated that the IUCW had evolved from a non-governmental umbrella organisation to an inter-governmental agency, or 'a smaller carbon copy of UNICEF'. Several Save the Children organisations – including the West German *Rettet das Kind* and the Norwegian *Redd Barna* – had instead decided to join with the American Save the Children in establishing a new body called the Save the Children Alliance. The problem, as far as Rädda Barnen was concerned, was the Alliance's close association with the NATO countries, which meant that a membership application would be difficult to reconcile with the established

²⁶Lars Gustafsson, 'Arbete bland barn i Sverige' (1979) 4 *Barnen & Vi* 28.

loyalty to Swedish neutrality politics, and might even jeopardise the organisation's sizeable grant from the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).²⁷ Joining the Alliance might cause Rädde Barnen to lose some of its 'Swedish identity', which, Landelius claimed, '... involves such immense goodwill in all international aid and humanitarian work'.²⁸

In order not to lose its international presence, Rädde Barnen's board agreed to establish the liaison office in Geneva under the name of Rädde Barnen International. At first, the office kept a low profile, concentrating on establishing ties to other child welfare and humanitarian organisations and to prepare applications for consultative status at the UN and UNICEF. The most visible part of its work was a seminar series on the 'Defenseless Child', promoting awareness of child abuse and Sweden's recent anti-spanking laws.²⁹ Rädde Barnen's first Geneva representative, Margareta Linnander, dedicated most of her time to her parallel commitment as UN representative of the Anti-Slavery Society. Her initial activity reports revealed no interest in issues of children's rights and did not even mention the incipient talks on the child rights convention.³⁰

The crucial turning point came in May 1981 when Rädde Barnen International was granted status as a Consultative Organisation (category II) in ECOSOC. This was remarkable given that the consultative status was reserved for international non-governmental groups, disqualifying purely national organisations. Rädde Barnen's key to success was to stress its independence from the other international child welfare organisations and its close ties to several UN agencies. The argument foregrounded in its application was that it was '... one of the biggest, if not the biggest, non-governmental contributor to the work carried out by UNHCR, UNICEF and UNRWA'.³¹ The successful application was a milestone in the organisation's history, transforming it – at least on paper – from a domestic civil society organisation to an international actor. But, as Landelius noted, it would likely lead to heightened expectations of participation in different areas related to child welfare, such as children's rights.³²

As a way of entering the formal negotiations on the convention, which had been underway for more than three years, Rädde Barnen's Ombudsman office hastily put together an alternative text for an international treaty on children's rights: *Carta Infantium*. The *Carta* was presented as a response to Poland's original draft, which Rädde Barnen '... felt should be improved to really strengthen the rights of all children'. This sounded more radical than it was. In reality, the *Carta* closely resembled the Polish draft, albeit with stronger language on child abuse and children in armed conflict. The text was presented to the Swedish, Danish and Norwegian foreign ministries in 1981, but appears to have been quickly forgotten – including by Rädde Barnen's representatives in Geneva, who would not refer to its content at later stages of the drafting process. The *Carta* nonetheless helped to reaffirm Rädde Barnen's identity as an organisation that was not only committed to children's rights as a political slogan but which was also dedicated to the progressive development of international human rights law. Again, the legacy of the Geneva

²⁷NA, RB, F1 a1, Håkan Landelius, 'PM för presidiet inför budgetarbetet 1979/80', 23 September 1979, Archives of Rädde Barnen.

²⁸NA, RB, F1 c21, Håkan Landelius, 'Rädde Barnen Interational 1984', 3 October 1983. These struggles within the international community of child welfare organisations remain poorly documented and call for more research.

²⁹Simone Ek, 'Rapport från Rädde Barnens Genèvekontor' (1982) Barnen & Vi 21.

³⁰NA, RB, F1 c21, Margareta Linnander, 'Rädde Barnen International: Verksamhetsrapport nr 2/80', 13 March 1980.

³¹NA, RB, F1 c21, 'Rädde Barnen's Application for Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council', 29 May 1980.

³²NA, RB, F1 c21, Håkan Landelius, 'PM: Rädde Barnen International', 12 October 1982.

Declaration of 1924 became a central tool of justification. Or as Bo Carlsson, one of the main authors of *Carta Infantium*, put it in 1981: 'When the first Declaration on Rights of the Child was created in Geneva at the beginning of this century, the voluntary organisations played an active role. We feel that the same should be the case this time.'³³

Children in Armed Conflict

In 1982, RBI's first full-time representative in Geneva, Simone Ek – who had served as international director for Rädde Barnen's activities during the International Year of the Child – for the first time participated in the negotiations on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. At that point, the discussions were, as one observer remarked, moving 'painfully slowly'.³⁴ The meetings, which were concentrated to the week before the annual session of the UN Commission on Human Rights, were generally ill-prepared. The attendance was low (28 states in total, only nine of which came from the UN's Asian, African and Latin American blocks) and the political atmosphere hostile.³⁵ The non-governmental actors also struggled to make their voices heard. Few of them had any previous experience from international treaty-making, which manifested itself in a stream of unrealistic amendments and badly composed speeches. Some state delegates consequently tended to '... switch off when it came to an NGO's turn to speak'.³⁶ In the early 1980s, it seemed far from evident that there ever would be a Convention on the Rights of the Child, let alone a Convention suffused with provisions originating in non-governmental cooperation.

In order to move the project forward and to secure a more positive role for NGOs within it, Rädde Barnen International, together with Defence for Children International (DCI) and the International Catholic Child Bureau (ICCB), decided to establish the informal NGO Group. The first meetings were called together by Ek in the Spring of 1983, but the group soon decided to name Canon Joseph Moerman of the ICCB – a well-known figure in international child welfare circles and the architect of the International Year of the Child – as its chairperson, and to use the Geneva offices of DCI as its secretariat.³⁷

The basic idea of the NGO-group, Ek explained in a formal invitation to some 15 Geneva-based child welfare organisations in March 1983, was to discuss ideas for 'additions and modifications' to the draft Convention, '... and, where appropriate, to define joint standpoints and individual responsibilities'.³⁸ The assumption was that joint NGO proposals that had already been subjected to scrutiny would stand a better chance of garnering support among state delegates than scattered proposals from individual organisations. This assumption proved right. According to one estimate, UNCRC contains about 15 substantial articles or paragraphs rooted in ideas first put forth by the NGO

³³Archives of Defence for Children International, Geneva (henceforth DCI), ST CRL Convention/Rädde Barnen Seminar, Bo Carlsson to Nigel Cantwell, 14 September 1981. For the text of the draft convention, see *Carta Infantium* (Rädde Barnen 1981).

³⁴Nigel Cantwell, 'A Convention? What Convention?' (1983) 1 *Children's Rights Monitor* 4.

³⁵David Johnson, 'Cultural and Regional Pluralism in the Drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child' in Michael Freeman and Philip Veerman (eds), *Ideologies of Children's Rights* (Martinus Nijhoff 1992) 28.

³⁶Michael Longford, 'NGOs and the Rights of the Child' in Peter Willetts (ed), *The Conscience of the World: The Influence of Non-Governmental Organisations in the UN System* (Hurst & Co 1996) 223.

³⁷Ek, *Självklart barnets rättigheter* (n 5) 30–41.

³⁸DCI, DCI-com-83-84, Simone Ek, 'Informal NGO Consultation on the Draft Convention on the Rights of the Child', 28 March 1983.

group, and about the same number of articles and paragraphs substantially altered because of its interventions.³⁹ In retrospect, this may seem like an unmitigated triumph for transnational child rights activism. Yet it is important to bear in mind that such gains were often hard fought, and the outcomes were not always what the non-governmental organisations hoped for.

One issue of particular interest to Rädga Barnen, and which surfaced early on in the NGO group, was children in armed conflict. One of the features that distinguished Rädga Barnen's 1981 draft convention from the official Polish draft, was the inclusion of provisions concerning the laws of war. Echoing the content of the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, *Carta Infantium* provided that children under the age of 15 years should not be allowed to partake in military operations. When the NGO group first convened in 1983, Rädga Barnen presented a different article on the same topic, specifying that children should always be regarded '... as a neutral conflict-free zone' and '... be secured from all kinds of physical and psychological violation'.⁴⁰ The organisation found a like-minded partner in the Quaker movement, which had circulated a similar text a year earlier and already during the NGO group's first substantial consultation meetings, the two organisations began to hammer out a joint proposal that was later submitted to the state delegates.

There were several factors that contributed to Rädga Barnen's highlighting of children in times of war. The notion of children as 'zones of peace' had just recently been coined by Rädga Barnen's senior board member, Nils Thedin, who also served as Sweden's long-term representative at UNICEF's Executive Board.⁴¹ In a UNICEF setting, Thedin used this term to advance a classic humanitarian position, underlining that international agencies must help children on all sides of a conflict. Thedin's vision of children as a 'zone of peace' had allegedly been born when he served on the International Commission for Assistance to Child Refugees in Spain in the 1930s.⁴² But, as Thedin noted, it was also an ideal that acquired renewed significance in the face of modern warfare, and the eradication of fixed boundaries between combatants and civilians: 'Ironically', he concluded, '... it seems that "women and children" now means "first" as targets. Today they are the victims to be attained, not the vulnerable subjects to be protected.'⁴³

The campaign for the rights of children in armed conflict also had links to Rädga Barnen's field operations in the 1980s. One of the most significant was its efforts to assist orphanage personnel in Lebanon dealing with children suffering from post-traumatic stress symptoms in the midst of the country's ravaging civil war. This project, which also included fact-finding missions in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in the aftermath of the 1982 massacres, was repeatedly used as a point of reference in the negotiations on the UNCRC. Such first-hand experience, the argument went, placed non-governmental organisations like Rädga Barnen in a unique position compared to that of state delegates and experts. The NGOs presented themselves as capable of discerning the needs and wants of even the most affected children and were called to bring their

³⁹Cited in Longford (n 36) 224.

⁴⁰DCI, NGO Ad hoc group: Reports, Proposals, etc, 'NGO Informal Consultation on the Draft Convention on the Rights of the Child', 7 July 1983.

⁴¹Ek, *Självlkart barnets rättigheter* (n 5) 126.

⁴²Maggie Black, *The Children and the Nations: The Story of UNICEF* (UNICEF 1986) 375.

⁴³Cited in Rädga Barnen, *Report: Children in Emergencies* (Rädga Barnen 1986) 49.

views into the codification of human rights law. The thrust of Rädde Barnen's work on the convention was that the meaning of children's rights was not to be decided in the abstract but in constant reference to the real-life experiences and interests of children.⁴⁴

The initial reactions to the idea of adding an article on children in armed conflict were far from enthusiastic. Some states voiced concern over the wording of the NGO draft, mainly because it singled out children – separate from their families and communities – as prioritised recipients of emergency assistance. Others dismissed the very idea of including language from the laws of war in the human rights document. The International Committee of the Red Cross, for instance, tried to sway the NGO group into abandoning the project, asserting that cherry-picking clauses from humanitarian law to a human rights treaty might lead to the creation of double standards and thus potentially jeopardise already existing standards.⁴⁵

The tide began to turn in 1985 when Sweden and the Netherlands (sponsored by Belgium, Finland, Peru and Senegal) decided to submit a joint article on children in armed conflict.⁴⁶ The draft consisted of a sweeping reference to humanitarian law standards relevant to children, but also spotlighted the issue of child soldiering, calling on states to '... refrain ... from recruiting children into the armed forces and ... take all feasible measures to ensure that children do not take part in hostilities'.⁴⁷ After some discussion and slight revisions, the draft was adopted by the Working Group in 1986.

The key political context for this sudden burst of interest in addressing the use of child soldiers in the child rights convention was the war between Iran and Iraq, and, more specifically, the explosion of accounts in Western media documenting the ways in which the Iranian armed forces habitually exploited children to clear minefields in preparation for Iranian tanks.⁴⁸ But the drafting also unfolded amidst heightened attention to the wartime exploitation of children as a global phenomenon. 1983, for instance, saw the publication of Roger Rosenblatt's award-winning travel essay *Children of War*, which drew together experiences of children in places like Cambodia, Lebanon, Northern Ireland, Palestine and Vietnam.⁴⁹ As child-soldiering gained recognition as an issue of worldwide concern, it also emerged as a legitimate target for international law.

At first, the NGO Group welcomed the adoption of the Dutch–Swedish amendment. It seemed like a recognition of child soldiering as a violation of human rights. It also testified to the increased willingness of state representatives to listen to the concerns of non-governmental actors. But the NGOs soon became aware of the article's deficiencies. The main headache, as both the Red Cross and Rädde Barnen noted in their official reactions to the Working Group, was that it did not contain a specific age limit on participation in battle. This was problematic since the convention also would allow for different interpretations of childhood. States in which the age of majority was reached at 14 years (the example given was Angola), could thus sign on to the convention and still be allowed to send such young persons to war. In effect, this meant that the convention would offer a lower degree of protection than that which was already granted in international treaties on the laws of war,

⁴⁴Lars H Gustafsson, Agneta Lindkvist and Birgitta Böhm, *Barn i krig: röster och fakta* (Verbum Gothia 1987). For more on this bottom-up approach to child rights advocacy, see Anette Faye Jacobsen, *Børn i alle lande!* (Thorup 1993) 43–44.

⁴⁵DCI, PRO-CRC 1983–1984, Michel Veuthey to Nigel Cantwell, 16 May 1984.

⁴⁶Hilde Reiding, *The Netherlands and the Development of International Human Rights Instruments* (Intersentia 2007) 296–97.

⁴⁷UN Doc E/CN4/1985/64 (1985) annex ii.

⁴⁸See, above all, Terence Smith, 'Iran: Five Years of Fanaticism' *New York Times Magazine* (New York, 12 February 1984) 21.

⁴⁹Roger Rosenblatt, *Children of War* (Anchor Press 1983).

where 15 years was generally used as the minimum age for military participation. Both Rädde Barnen and the Red Cross concluded their statements by demanding that the text must be renegotiated to make sure that the convention would not undermine existing standards. Rädde Barnen even suggested that the best way forward would be to improve on current humanitarian standards by introducing a strict 18-year-old lower limit for both recruitment and participation.⁵⁰

This became the starting point for an intense campaign to recognise that all persons below the age of 18 years were children and should thus be protected against forms of military involvement. A key figure in this campaign was Rädde Barnen's new Secretary-General, Thomas Hammarberg. Born in 1942, Hammarberg had begun his engagement with human rights in the 1960s when he, as a member of the Liberal Party's youth section, helped to organise protests against the apartheid regime in South Africa and the military dictatorship in Greece. After a successful career in Amnesty International – including six years as Secretary-General and head of its London office – he joined Rädde Barnen in 1986.⁵¹ Hammarberg immediately announced his intention to strengthen Rädde Barnen's identity as a human rights organisation, and to give priority to the work of finalising the UNCRC. In a 1987 op-ed for the *International Herald Tribune*, he lamented the lack of respect for international humanitarian law concerning children – citing the war between Iran and Iraq, but also the situations in Afghanistan, Angola, Central America and Mozambique – and called on the international community to support the non-governmental organisations in their quest for '... stricter standards for the protection of minors' in the child rights convention.⁵²

After much lobbying effort, Rädde Barnen, the Quakers and the Red Cross managed to get a group of states, including Sweden and the Netherlands, to back the idea of raising the minimum age for military participation. They then managed to get the grudging consent of the Working Group's president, Adam Lopatka, to renegotiate the text. But even though a near complete majority of the states came out in support of a stronger wording, the United States and the USSR used the working group's consensus principle to block further progress. The official explanation was that a UN human rights body was not authorised to improve on existing standards of humanitarian law.⁵³ This was a separate legal field with its institutional home in the International Committee of the Red Cross, not the United Nations. But reports from the Swedish Embassy in Washington DC, which organised several consultations with the US State Department, also reveal how the US position was motivated out of a commitment to the country's established practice of recruiting 17-year-olds with parental consent into the US armed forces.⁵⁴

When commenting on the final version of the treaty in 1990, Hammarberg was thus forced to conclude that the article on children in armed conflicts was one of its most

⁵⁰For a more detailed account of this episode in the drafting process, see Linde Lindkvist, 'When the War Came: The Child Rights Convention and the Conflation of Human Rights and the Laws of War' in Jean Quataert and Lora Wildenthal (eds), *The Routledge History of Human Rights* (Forthcoming, Routledge 2019).

⁵¹Carl Otto Werkelid, 'Thomas Hammarberg – medmänniska i hemslöjdsslips' (1986) 25(2) *Barnen och Vi* 32.

⁵²Thomas Hammarberg, 'Children Shouldn't Pay the Costs of Adults' Wars' *Herald Tribune* (Paris, 23 January 1987).

⁵³NAS, Swedish UN Delegation in Geneva, Vol F1C:4, HP48, mål 4/3, del 1, 'Protocol of the Debate of the Working Group, Article 20', 7 December 1988.

⁵⁴NAS, Swedish UN Delegation in New York, Vol F2:a 84–85, HP48, mål K/B, del 71, 'Letter from Amb. Rönnquist to Swedish UN-delegation', 18 January 1988. See also Vik and Østberg in this issue.

disappointing features.⁵⁵ While Rädde Barnen and its partners within the NGO group had succeeded in placing the issue of children in armed conflict on the agenda and had mustered overwhelming support in favour of an 18-year limit, the outcome was nonetheless far from what they had hoped for. It would take another decade of coalition-building and lobbying efforts before the so-called 'straight-18-movement' that Rädde Barnen helped to initiate would succeed in establishing the first additional protocol to the convention, which essentially complemented the article on children armed conflict with clauses stipulating a higher age limit for both recruitment and participation in battle.⁵⁶ 1989, however, was a moment of defeat for the straight-18-movement.

Female Genital Mutilation

If the campaign against child soldiering ended in disappointment, Rädde Barnen and its allies were more successful in their efforts to frame female genital mutilation as a violation of children's human rights. Together with the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children (Inter-African Committee) – a Dakar based group with members from roughly 20 African countries, partially funded by SIDA – Rädde Barnen succeeded in getting the working group behind a clause in the article on the right to health (Article 24), requesting states to '... take all effective and appropriate measures with a view to abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children'. This wording was deliberately chosen to cover female genital mutilation – which was gradually gaining acceptance as a global health issue – while at the same time excluding male circumcision.⁵⁷

Female genital mutilation had been on Rädde Barnen's agenda from the day it opened its Geneva office in 1979. As mentioned above, Rädde Barnen International's first representative, Margareta Linnander, also worked for the Anti-Slavery Society, which in 1978 had sought to raise the question of female circumcision in the UN Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and the Protection of Minorities and helped to establish a committee for non-governmental organisations working on the topic. Through this channel, Rädde Barnen was imbricated in the international campaign against female genital mutilation and established close ties with African women's rights activists. These connections also had several practical consequences, including boosted efforts to spread awareness of female genital mutilation among Rädde Barnen's members and the wider Swedish society, and the decision to sponsor local information campaigns in Kenya, Mali and Sudan.⁵⁸

After the formation of the Inter-African Committee in 1984, Rädde Barnen worked closely with its Geneva representative, the Ethiopian activist Berhane Ras-Work, both in breaking the taboo on female genital mutilation within UNICEF and in making sure the practice was seen as an assault on human rights. The crucial turning point, Simone

⁵⁵Thomas Hammarberg, 'The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—and How to Make It Work', (1990) 12(1) Human Rights Quarterly 101.

⁵⁶Claire Breen, 'The Role of NGOs in the Formulation of and Compliance with the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict' (2003) 25 Human Rights Quarterly 453.

⁵⁷Kelly J Shannon, 'The Right to Bodily Integrity: Women's Rights as Human Rights and the International Movement to End Female Genital Mutilation, 1970s–1990s' in Akira Iriye and others (eds), *The Human Rights Revolution* (Oxford University Press 2012) 288–92.

⁵⁸Ek, *Självklart barnets rättigheter* (n 5) 78–93.

Ek recalls in her autobiographical account, was an Inter-African Committee workshop in Dakar in 1984, in which the Senegalese Minister of Health participated and announced that his government would be willing to sponsor an article on harmful traditional practices in the UNCRC. The Senegalese UN delegation – the only sub-Saharan delegation participating actively in the Convention’s framing – honoured this promise and submitted a draft, closely following the formula suggested by the NGO group. The fact that an African state assumed ownership over the issue, together with the nebulous terminology of ‘harmful traditional practices’, helped to defuse charges of cultural imperialism and to secure its adoption.⁵⁹

The UNCRC marked a new chapter in the international movement against female genital mutilation – a movement that had been gaining pace through the 1970s and 1980s – in so far as it connected the medical discussion to the discourse of rights. Rädga Barnen’s main contribution, as Simone Ek also acknowledges, was to help to draw the link between these two discourses, a contribution that not only originated in moral outrage over female genital operations as a practice but in the cooperation with African activists. The connection to the Rädga Barnen funded field projects also helped to legitimise the codification efforts at the UN as essentially a bottom-up project. In Rädga Barnen’s own view, it came to the table, not to impose its moral vision on the world, but to amplify the views of children and child-rights activists in countries where female genital mutilation was a widespread practice.⁶⁰

The campaigns against child soldiers and female genital mutilation showcase the way non-governmental actors successfully helped to influence the content of the UNCRC, thus effectively pushing the boundaries of the concept of children’s rights. But these two cases also showcase the limits to their influence. In the end, Rädga Barnen and its partners in the NGO Group had to rely on states to champion their proposals in the drafting group. Not infrequently, the deliberations led to thorough revisions of some original idea, and the outcome was sometimes far from what the non-governmental actors had hoped for.

These two cases also illustrate how Rädga Barnen frequently justified its presence and concrete ideas by pointing to its own status as a grass-roots organisation. Rädga Barnen aimed to function as a ‘spokesperson for children’, or even, as Kerstin Anér put it, as ‘... an ombudsman for the world’s children’. In a 1985 piece for Rädga Barnen’s *Barnen & Vi*, Simone Ek argued that the Geneva office had ‘... transformed from an eyehole to a spokesperson’. ‘Our child ombudsmanship’, she continued, ‘... has been successful when we have represented children in the work on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in the work on street children, female circumcision, child refugees, and children in armed conflict’.⁶¹

Needless to say, the ombudsman or advocacy ideal was full of tensions – the most obvious being that of representativity: how could a Swedish NGO legitimately claim to speak for the world’s children?⁶² But there were other tensions as well. One of the underlying convictions guiding Rädga Barnen’s work was that children’s rights was a dynamic

⁵⁹Ibid. 84–88; UN Doc E/CN4/1987/25 (1987), paras 28–39.

⁶⁰Madi Gray, ‘Kvinnlig omskärelse: Ett afrikanskt problem som angår oss alla’, (1983) 22(1) *Barnen & Vi* 30–31.

⁶¹Simone Ek, ‘Från titthål till talrör’ (1985) 24(2) *Barnen & Vi* 22.

⁶²Kerstin Anér, *Varför ska man rädga barn?* (Rädga Barnen 1984) 168. Anér described Rädga Barnen’s Geneva office as an ‘international child ombudsman’, while also noting that this might leave the organisation open to charges of hyperbole.

concept; that the drafters had to create norms that were relevant to the ever-changing predicaments facing children in their everyday lives. Still, the norms that Rätta Barnen advanced often took the form of top-down prohibitions of different social practices. At least in the context of female genital mutilation and child soldiers, the idea was not to strengthen children's agency, but to introduce new standards on child protection. The parts that present-day child rights scholars view as the truly novel aspects of the convention – including clauses on children's freedom of expression and freedom of assembly – were not central concerns of Rätta Barnen. While it engaged creatively with the concept of children's rights, it was not – at least not in the drafting process – an outspoken advocate of children's civil and political rights. Rather, its creativity was contained within a fairly conventional framework of child protection.⁶³

Conclusions

In this article, I have shown how Rätta Barnen transformed into a child rights organisation in the 1970s, and, later became an active presence in the drafting of the UNCRC. What I have also shown, however, is how it was far from evident that the organisation's commitment to children's rights in the 1970s would later include a focus on the progressive development of children's rights as an area of human rights law. Its involvement in the drafting process was a direct consequence of its granting of consultative status in the early 1980s, which in turn owed much to internal frictions within the larger Save the Children movement.

In the second part, I showed how Rätta Barnen's work in the drafting on the convention involved a creative engagement with the concept of children's rights. The organisation challenged the common assumption that child soldiering and female genital mutilation were not issues of human rights but belonged to the related but separate areas of humanitarian law and global health. In such ways, Rätta Barnen, albeit incidentally, helped to question some of the established boundaries of the international human rights framework. At the same time, the organisation was not particularly active in other parts of the convention – such as its allegedly novel provisions on civil and political rights. This reminds us that when we study the contributions of specific actors to the creation of international human rights standards, we must also take into account that conventions do not emerge as stable entities, but as patchworks of very different human rights principles, each rooted in different local concerns and political interests.

All of this allows us to glimpse some of the many uncertainties surrounding the concept of children's rights in the late 1970s and 1980s. 'The phrase "Children's rights"', Hillary Rodham Clinton famously noted in 1973, 'is a slogan in search of definition'.⁶⁴ Rätta Barnen participated in this search, often advancing creative ideas that – albeit incidentally – challenged how both children's rights and human rights more broadly had previously been articulated in international settings. This creative engagement was made possible by the lack of conceptual agreement. But it was also made possible by Rätta Barnen's bottom-up approach, which emphasised that the concept of children's rights had to be

⁶³For this distinction between child protection and child liberation, see John Wall, *Children's Rights: Today's Global Challenge* (Rowman & Littlefield 2017) ch 3.

⁶⁴Hillary Rodham, 'Children Under the Law' (1973) 43 *Harvard Educational Review* 487.

shaped to address the concrete and changing realities of children. What mattered was not fidelity to established boundaries between, for instance, human rights and humanitarian law, or between human rights and global health, but the norms' practical relevance.

To a large degree, the enactment of the UNCRC in the fall of 1989 spelt the end to such creative engagement. As critical child rights scholars have reminded us, the meaning of children's rights has now roughly become equated with the UNCRC.⁶⁵ The convention functions as the central normative frame for the vast majority of actors dedicated to the rights of children, including state agencies, international bodies and non-governmental organisations like Rädde Barnen and other members of the Save the Children movement. Returning to the 1970s and 1980s allows us to see how it was not at all evident that a commitment to children's rights would also involve a commitment to the promotion of international human rights law, and, finally, that the convention that we now see as a nearly timeless expression of children's human rights, was a product of particular concerns and historical contingencies.

⁶⁵See e.g. Jonathan Josefsson, 'Children at the Borders' (PhD diss, Linköping University 2016) 23.