



CRIN: Managing flows of information in the child rights community

The networking of international NGOs to participate in the drafting process and later monitoring and promotion of the Convention on the Rights of the Child had a profound impact not seen before in human rights history. National NGOs not customarily involved in human rights have also joined forces to promote the rights of children and to hold their governments accountable in a manner laid out in the Convention.,”

Denise Allen, NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

CRIN: Managing flows of information in the child rights community

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Introduction

This paper examines some of the challenges of managing increasing information flows in the child rights community, and looks specifically at the experience of the Child Rights Information Network in balancing the needs of a divergent community with varied technological capacities. The 1980s and 1990s brought with it tremendous ideological shifts. This was the triumph of democracy and capitalism; and that brought with it a new excitement over human rights as well as the dawn of the Information Age. Since then, the Internet has already transformed the way governments interact with civil society and has increased transparency and accountability. Couple this advancement with two unique qualities of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – it is the most universally signed human rights convention *and* in its implementation it explicitly gives a voice internationally to NGOs – and it becomes easy to see why the child rights community is still coming to terms with how they can best unleash the potential of technology to promote and realise child rights.

The Child Rights Information Network (which is more widely known by its acronym (CRIN)) is a global information service that disseminates information about child rights to a membership of over 1,100 organisations and individuals that are based all around the world. In addition to working with member organisations, CRIN services the needs of approximately 1,600 organisations that have joined our mailing lists without becoming members. About 84 percent of members are non-government organisations (NGOs) and about two-thirds are in the South. CRIN's products and services – which includes the world-wide web, email, fax and mail – ensures easy and reliable access to a wide range of information, news and documentation on child rights.

CRIN is supported by UNICEF, Rädde Barnen, Save the Children UK and the International Save the Children Alliance. Since 1995, support by two organisations in particular – Rädde Barnen (also known as Save the Children Sweden) and UNICEF – has been instrumental to CRIN's development. Rädde Barnen and UNICEF played key roles in establishing CRIN and they have also consistently funded almost two-thirds of CRIN's budget. Financial

and additional in-kind support has come from CRIN's host organisation: Save the Children UK; and since 1998, CRIN has received funding from the International Save the Children Alliance (through its members specifically Save the Children Norway and Save the Children USA).

The Child Rights Information Network was formally set up at an international meeting in July 1995, almost six years after the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations. Sixty representatives from national, regional and international NGOs, UN agencies, and academic institutions met at the International Children's Centre in Paris. The group agreed to establish the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) based on principles of informality, participation and consultative decision-making featuring national and regional focal points. Three broad aims and objectives for CRIN then adopted were:

- To support and promote the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child at national and international levels;
- To contribute to satisfying the varied information needs of organisations and individuals working for child rights at the grassroots, national, regional and international levels;
- To support child rights organisations in their endeavour to develop information systems and methods of information exchange, using both electronic and non-electronic networking tools.

Experience since 1995 has given CRIN a very unique role within the human rights community. CRIN is the only child rights organisation that does all of the following: it works with a global network of organisations working on child rights – a wide range of actors including national, regional and international NGOs, United Nations agencies and research institutions; its products and services enable it to be a global information resource on child rights issues; and its partnerships with key NGO coalitions, groups and caucuses enable it to promote and support the implementation of child rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Yet the continual challenge for CRIN – both as a global network and global information resource – has been three-fold. This paper examines CRIN's history through three main phases, and then reviews how CRIN is now working to address these questions:

1. How to manage the specialised needs of experts working in national and international NGOs, the United Nations, and research institutions?
2. How to meet the regional and national needs of child rights professionals working in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and South America as well as Europe and North America?
3. How to bridge the digital divide that exists between North and South in order to capitalise on the global information society?

Child rights, the Convention and networking

CRIN developed within the framework of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and alongside the growth of the child rights community. The Convention was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations by its resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 and entered into force on 2 September 1990. Since then, the Convention has been ratified more quickly and by more governments (all except Somalia and the US) than any other human rights instrument. Its 54 articles outline the protection and promotion of children's development and participation in society in the broadest sense by combining the human rights of the child, the child's civil and political rights and the child's rights to participate in decisions that affect them.ⁱⁱ

The adoption of the Convention and its almost universal ratification has contributed to the continued growth of children's rights NGOs and networks. For example, the number of national child rights coalitions throughout the world continues to grow; it is up from just over 60 at the beginning of 1998 to over 100 in March 2001. During the same period CRIN's membership grew from just over 400 to over 1,100.

Yet the most telling example of organisational growth in the child rights community is drawn from the preparatory process for the Special Session on Children of the United Nations General Assembly reviewing the achievements of the goals of the 1990 World Summit for Childrenⁱⁱⁱ and finalising an action plan for children for the next decade. More than 3,600 children's NGOs – specifically organisations accredited with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or with UNICEF – were invited to the second Substantive Session of the Preparatory Committee from 29 January to 2 February 2001. Many of these were the more established child welfare organisations that adopted a children's rights perspective. UNICEF, for example, changed from a need based to a child rights approach in the late 1990s.

The implementation of the Convention in almost all countries in the world (with the first states reporting in 1992) and the attendant growth of the children's rights community led to new information needs and demands. The Convention set out the monitoring and reporting obligations of States Parties to the Convention, i.e. national governments. Two years after each state has ratified the Convention, it is obliged to present a written report to an expert committee of ten detailing the progress of national implementation. States are then obliged to present periodic reports every five years. Unlike any other international treaty, the Convention sets out a unique monitoring and reporting role for a United Nations body (UNICEF) and NGOs. Article 45 states that UNICEF and other competent bodies (meaning NGOs) can be invited by the Committee to give 'expert advice'^{iv} and information. The production of NGO reports for presentation to the Committee on the Rights of the Child has brought new demands to gather, analyse and disseminate information about the situation of children and their rights as well as the need to exchange experiences at the national and international level.

Networking as one of the *modus operandi* of all NGOs also increased over the last decade. Not least because of the information age where access to and use of

information is recognised as essential to NGOs to meet organisational objectives.

The development of CRIN

PHASE 1: THE IDEA AND FEASIBILITY OF CRIN (1991 TO 1995)

The preparatory phase of CRIN dates back to 1991, before the Committee on the Rights of the Child ever convened its first session. At this time experts from child rights organisations – including UNICEF Geneva Regional Office, UNICEF New York, Defence for Children International (DCI), and Rättna Barnen – were already asking what would happen with information generated through the reporting process of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The group muddled over questions including: 'What would happen with the information?', and 'What would be the documentation handling process?' The group met on numerous occasions and visited the OHCHR Documentation Centre to see how the documentation system was organised (at that time Microfiche was used), and UNICEF Geneva's information resource section.

Set against this background, the first phase of CRIN dates from 1991 until July 1995, when an informal secretariat conducted work on behalf of a 'child rights information network'. The secretariat consisted of Rättna Barnen and DCI, and was hosted by DCI in Geneva. The two organisations moved CRIN from concept to reality. Their work included all preparations, fundraising and administration, as well securing the support from key actors that would later help establish CRIN in July 1995.

In 1992, DCI and Rättna Barnen approached UNICEF for funding and as a partner. The three organisations convened an international workshop in Geneva in November 1992 on the topic of 'NGO Information Systems and Children's Rights'. Staff from NGOs and UN agencies with experience in managing information attended the meeting. The main thrust of the discussions was: 'How to harness the potential of information exchange in order to strengthen the implementation and monitoring of the Convention?' The workshop inspired the idea for the establishment of an information network. A group of international NGOs with UNICEF (later known as the Facilitating Group) continued to meet informally to develop and implement the idea. A follow-up meeting in 1993 also addressed the specific question of how to meet the specific information needs of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

At those earliest stages, the need for a network was based on several assumptions.

1. There is a wealth of information about children and the issues that affect them. Governments, academic institutions, and non-government organisations hold this information but access to it is neither easy nor systematic.
2. There is no comprehensive picture of who holds what information, what type of information is available, or how it can be obtained.

3. Once it is known where information is held, a network would be the most appropriate mechanism for connecting these 'information centres'.
4. The child rights community is very diverse, operates on many different levels and handles information in many different ways. This context requires a networking approach to information exchange rather than the adoption of one system for information collection and dissemination.
5. Finally, creating cooperation between child rights organisations on information handling could avoid duplication and would support mutual learning.

From 1993 to 1995, the Facilitating Group concentrated on projects that sought to develop the information network:

- Existing information-handling capacities of child rights organisations were mapped. Human Rights Internet (HRI) was commissioned to undertake this survey. The results of the survey, which were published in 1995, provided the first data on the status of information collection within the children's rights community. It was the first organisation directory and database.
- The need for the establishment of common, internationally recognised concepts in children's rights became a key priority. This included the idea of developing a children's rights thesaurus and glossary, which would support communication and information handling (proposed by Rädde Barnen and Defence for Children International). In 1993, the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre commissioned this project. The thesaurus in English, French and Spanish, alongside a glossary and bibliography, were finally published in 2000.
- A survey of research on the Convention on the Rights of the Child was undertaken by European academic institutions, supported by the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, and carried out by Childwatch International and UNESCO. A directory of the findings was published.
- A full text database on information on the Convention on the Rights of the Child was developed based on Committee on the Rights of the Child requirements. The work was undertaken by UNICEF Geneva, and the database was handed over to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and is now the Treaty Bodies Database available on the Internet at www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf. The NGO reports submitted to the Committee are now available in a database developed by CRIN in co-operation with the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This database is available on CRIN's web site.

By this time the Facilitating Group included Defence for Children International (international secretariat), International Centre for Childhood and the Family,

International Save the Children Alliance, NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Rädda Barnen (Save the Children Sweden), Save the Children UK, UNICEF International Child Development Centre (now known as the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre), UNICEF and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Membership later expanded to include southern representatives.

The survey by Human Rights Internet was instrumental in refuting many of the earlier assumptions held by the Facilitating Group. It showed that the information handling capacities of children's rights organisations were neither sophisticated nor widespread^{iv}. Deliberate information management and the use of information technology were relatively new among NGOs, particularly (although not exclusively) among smaller and southern-based organisations. At that time only 11 percent of organisations were using email. And a 'child rights approach' to collecting, analysing and disseminating information was underdeveloped.

As a result it became clear that to the Facilitating Group that a network, which would simply connect existing information centres, was not yet possible. A different approach to information networking was needed; the idea of formally establishing the Child Rights Information Network (CRIN) became the top priority.

PHASE 2: SETTING UP CRIN (1995)

In January 1995, the Facilitating Group appointed a co-ordinator (Ms. Becky Purbrick)^{vi} to develop a network proposal that would be discussed six months later at the International Children's Centre in Paris. Work focused on research into potential structure, membership and activities. Eight preliminary project proposals^{vii} were drafted based on the results of the questionnaire and previous consultations within the Facilitating Group. It was sent to 222 child rights and child-focused organisations – 172 in the South and 50 in the North – to identify their information needs and the services they could use. There was a good response – 59 percent of the organisations returned their questionnaires.

The international meeting was held in July 1995 and attended by 60 participants who represented decision and policy makers as well as information workers. This was a deliberate decision to engage primary information users who could assess the potential use of a network and who could harness organisational commitment. It became apparent that needs were broad and far-reaching. Five project proposals were agreed to: (1) the creation of a database of organisations with information on the Rights of the Child, organisations undertaking research, and resource persons working on child rights, (2) publication of a network newsletter; (3) a full text database on the Convention on the Rights of the Child; (4) training in information handling on the rights of the child; (5) a research project on the Internet and child rights organisations. Not surprisingly, obstacles identified included the lack of resources, technical expertise, managing too much information (and often the wrong kind) and absence of an information and knowledge-based culture.

While the proposed network could not address all of these needs, the proposed projects were intended as a beginning. The participants agreed to support the

development of an informal, open and free network, with an expanded Facilitating Group to steer the work, and a small co-ordinating unit hosted by an international organisation (then and currently at Save the Children UK). Ms. Purbrick stayed on as Coordinator.

After the Paris meeting, CRIN's work was guided by the five priority projects agreed to in Paris. The Co-ordinator achieved considerable progress including the development of the role and structure of the Facilitating Group. The Facilitating Group was expanded to include southern organisations: African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect, Arab Resource Collective, Butterflies, Concern for Working Children and Instituto Interamericano del Niños. The Co-ordinator worked with South-based organisations to develop mechanisms for addressing their needs and interests; consolidated membership contributions; initiated the development of the five selected project proposals; and promoted CRIN and its aims.

PHASE 3: CONSOLIDATING AND LEARNING (1996-2001)

By January 1996, the CRIN Newsletter was launched as the first project. It was initially launched as a communications and promotional tool. In its early days the newsletter included: news from the Facilitating Group and the new CRIN coordinating unit; profiles of new CRIN members; information about new initiatives; references to new child rights publications; websites of interest; and forthcoming conferences on child rights issues. Each issue of the CRIN Newsletter was published in English, French and Spanish and included a membership form.

Work began on preparing a database of children's rights organisations in March 1996. A questionnaire for gathering information for the database was distributed with each issue of the newsletter. The database was designed to hold information about the aims and activities of each organisation; their programmes and work; their information collections organised according to the articles in the Convention; and details of their research and publications. The database was published on CRIN's website and two printed editions of CRIN's membership directory, which were related to this project, were published in March 1997 and April 1998.

Initially, response to the questionnaire was not encouraging. The co-ordinating unit actually needed a fully functioning and responsive network of members to gather information systematically. The quality of responses was also variable as organisations were asked to describe their own information collections according to the Convention. But as noted earlier, specific tools for cataloguing children's rights information are not fully developed and so many collections are not organised according to the articles of the Convention. Members were also not necessarily clear why this information was needed or how it might be of use to them. As other CRIN services became available and members began seeing the direct benefit of using and contributing to the network., gathering information from member organisations improved.

At this time an attempt was made to develop a training programme on information handling on the rights of the child. A working group within CRIN, which included members from Ghana, Mexico, India, Sweden and UK,

was asked to submit a proposal to the Facilitating Group. The proposal was rejected in favour of training initiatives that would form part of CRIN's future regional programmes.

CRINMAIL, the network's third project was at first a private mailing list and was introduced in January 1997. The service was used to post news and announcements, and to pose questions to other network members.

CRINMAIL dramatically changed the nature of communications within the network. For the first year, top-down links between the coordinating unit and individual members dominated communication. But the CRINMAIL opened up horizontal links between network members. Members were able to see inputs from others, often encouraging their own contributions. CRINMAIL also provided a means of tapping into information and knowledge that is so often in people's heads rather than in a database or library. Responses to questions posted on the CRINMAIL often arrived within a few days and were based on members' personal knowledge and experience.

In March 1997, development of CRIN's website began in earnest, even though members' Internet access lagged behind their use of email. One in six members (ranging from Case Alianza from Costa Rica and Child Workers in Asia based in Thailand) were already creating their own websites. Implicit in the development of CRIN's website was the assumption that full access to the Internet – email and website access – would increase among network members even if access and use of the Internet would remain unequal between the North and the South.

CRIN's website was designed to provide 'a first port of call for anyone seeking children's rights information on the Internet'. When launched the website included CRIN's *Website directory of children and children's rights information*. (Published versions came out in December 1997 and April 1998.) The initial website was divided into five sections:

1. Issues relating to children's rights including full text documentation, information relating to the Convention, who is doing what and conference information.
2. Publications – a growing bibliographic reference of children's rights publications.
3. Databases – direct access to CRIN's organisations database and links to other useful databases.
4. The Convention on the Rights of the Child including full text documentation, guidelines, monitoring information and ratifications.
5. Information about CRIN including project details, membership details and links to members' websites.

Developing a participatory network to collect and disseminate information has been a guiding principle throughout CRIN's evolution. Thus decentralised access and updating of the database became an important goal in the late 1990s. At that time, local copies of the database were piloted briefly

with CRIN members in Sweden, Switzerland, Uruguay and India. Each member was required to add information and send and receive updated entries to the database and the server at UNICEF in Geneva. The pilot exercise highlighted some of the difficulties of international information collection and dissemination. As examples: replicating the database between Uruguay and Geneva incurred high communications costs; local training and technical support to use the software were difficult to find; providing technical support at a distance had cultural and language implications; integrating internal databases with CRIN's database was not always appropriate or simple, and member organisations had limited resources to gather information on behalf of the network.

The concept of 'virtual' thematic desks on the website was introduced in June 1997 to further encourage the participation and contributions of CRIN's members and to provide a mechanism for systematic and focused information collection and dissemination. Members with expertise in a particular theme were invited to contribute information to one or more thematic desks; and in a number of instances one member played the co-ordinating role.

Over twenty CRIN members contributed to the first theme: child labour, by providing electronic and printed materials. The coordinating unit was responsible for the technical aspects of managing the website. Members were enthusiastic and saw the benefits of disseminating their own information to a wider audience at a low cost. A common structure for each desk was defined and included different types of information, which were then stored and disseminated throughout CRIN's website. The types of information included full text and bibliographic materials on each issue; conference information including agendas, participants, papers and reports; information about activities and research; and information relating to the Convention and other international treaties.

Feedback from members was encouraging, and two new desks were created on sexual exploitation of children and on monitoring the Convention through national coalitions of child rights. The NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child approached CRIN to establish the latter, a positive development.

However, not all members were providing information proactively and the co-ordinating unit ended up playing a crucial role and reminding members to contribute. Some members were better equipped to do so, often because they had given organisational priority to advocacy, campaigning and information dissemination. The service was attractive to CRIN members because, in 1997, most did not have the resources, thematic expertise or capacity to publish their own documentation on the Internet.

At this time there was also a significant change in the management of the network. A four-member Management Team replaced the Facilitating Group, which had grown to almost 20 members. The Facilitating Group had taken CRIN through the necessary first step, *and* had generated wide support and legitimacy for CRIN. Up until then, the Co-ordinator's work was guided and supported by the Facilitating Group. The change was crucial at a time when the CRIN required action-oriented directives and greater clarity of vision. Since

then CRIN's Management Team has consisted of representative of Rädda Barnen, Save the Children UK, UNICEF Geneva Regional Office and the Arab Resource Collective.

EVALUATION OF CRIN & SETTING NEW GOALS

At the end of November 1997, an external consultant^{viii} evaluated CRIN through means of a questionnaire sent to members and confirmed the contribution CRIN had made to the promotion of information exchange within the child rights community, as well as the potential of CRIN for the future.

Since its establishment CRIN had managed to collaborate with NGOs and United Nations organisations, particularly UNICEF, to contribute to three positive trends in the child rights environment:

1. The rapid proliferation of child rights implementation activities and a corresponding increase in the supply and demand for information on these issues. This was a result of the near-universal ratification of the Convention, the increasing flow and use of State Parties reports, and the evolution of rights-based programming approached by major child-focused organisations.
2. Child rights activities were increasingly being undertaken by NGOs and other civil society mechanisms at all levels. Encouraged by most governments and international organisations, this includes activities at the community, national, regional and global levels.
3. The rapid growth and capacity of communications technology (especially electronic technology) was making it more possible to meet the information needs of those working to implement child rights irrespective of where they were located.

Overall, the evaluation based on members' views revealed strong commitment to CRIN's objectives, support for CRIN's products, and support for the continuation of an expanded CRIN co-ordinating unit. Moreover, the structure, communications strategy and current management arrangements were approved, particularly in respect to the development of a theme desk model. CRIN products, especially CRINMAIL and the website, were viewed as essential communications tools for the network. The newsletter also received strong support, notably from organisations in the South.

Areas that continue to require attention were identified as those related to regional capacity building, including training, multi-lingual capacity, technical support, support for advocacy in the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and communications. Additionally, there was a consensus that the roles of the co-ordinating unit, Management Team and Facilitating Group require clarification and consolidation within the context of future planning, albeit there was overall support for the continuation of the new three-member management model, since initial results were considered very good.

The evaluation recommended the following priorities: creation of regionally-based initiatives; further development of theme desks; the development of

members' activities; a programme-centred Advisory Group selected mainly from the network membership; and a management team set within a structure that issues guidelines.

The evaluation was instrumental in shaping the work from 1998-2001. Encouraging and sustaining information-based contributions from network members became the priority. And it was felt that capacity building through regional activities and training in information management were required in order to receive regular contributions. The major priorities for the 1998-2001 period were set on: (1) Continuation and consolidation of CRIN's core activities; (2) establishment of partnership projects to build the network at regional and national levels; (3) Capacity building to strengthen CRIN's global communications network.

FINDINGS OF THE SECOND USER SURVEY: MARCH 1999.

The second annual user survey confirmed the value of CRIN as an information tool. The survey was sent to 700 members and 193 surveys were returned indicating a 27 percent return rate. The survey found that the newsletter is the most widely used and known product, followed by the membership directory and CRINMAIL. CRIN members prefer to access information that is sent to them rather than seek information from the Web. These user preferences underlines the value of CRINMAIL as a means of disseminating information and as a promotional tool for the website. There is a continued need for hardcopy material as well as further development of electronic production and dissemination. Two of CRIN's products in particular have good reach in the South: CRINMAIL (delivered by email); and the CRIN Newsletter.

When asked to comment on the most effective methods of exchanging information: 61 percent ranked face-to-face meetings, conferences and workshops as the most effective method of exchanging information followed by mail, telephone and fax. Southern organisations relied more heavily on mail in comparison with Northern organisations that relied heavily on fax. Only 7 percent identified email as the most effective means of communication and there was no difference between Northern and Southern organisations. However a significant number of organisations are currently investigating or introducing email and the linkages with the Internet.

CRIN CONSULTATIVE MEETING IN CYPRUS: MAY 1999

CRIN's first consultative meeting was held 25 - 27 May 1999 to listen to members' comments on progress, ideas for the future and suggestions for CRIN's regional programme. The Arab Resource Collective in Cyprus hosted the meeting. It included 17 representatives from national, regional and international NGOs and UNICEF in Belgium, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Jordan, Lebanon, Nepal, Palestine, Sudan, Togo, United Kingdom, Yemen and Zimbabwe.

The consultations included a group discussion on the challenges of communication and information networks as experienced by the participants in their own regions. Key issues that emerged were:

- The use of particular languages within a region can exclude access to information by advocates and practitioners who are working in their own languages.
- There is a need to translate and interpret information between regions and from international sources such as the United Nations.
- Information exchange often excludes those working directly with children.
- Different levels of socio-economic development can hamper effective exchange between and within regions.
- Key international issues of the day such as child labour, can be useful in raising awareness but may overshadow more pressing local issues.

Furthermore, there was an informal discussion to help develop CRIN's regional programme. Recommendations included the following:

- Providing information in a range of languages should be a priority. This would require tackling the challenges of translation and interpretation.
- CRIN's web site should provide more country-based information and should make more use of network expertise to develop the theme desks further.
- CRIN should improve its response to violations of children's human rights. This would include providing and exchanging information about children in countries where their situation is often ignored or under-reported. CRIN should establish a theme email list for violations.
- CRIN is ideally positioned to promote co-operation among organisations that compete for funds and have conflicting agendas.
- The recommendations recognised that funding, substantial and technical support is critical to the development of CRIN's regional programme and the establishment of regional partners.

A review of key issues

MANAGING SPECIALISED INFORMATION NEEDS OF CHILD RIGHTS EXPERTS

The end of the third phase of CRIN's development, from 1999 to 2000, was a tumultuous phase. It included many successes but there were also challenges brought on by the growth of the child rights community. On practical, day-to-day levels, the growing interests in child rights contributed to an increased demand for CRIN's products and services. Membership, for example, continued to grow steadily from 480 organisational and individual members in April 1998, to 806 members in May 1999 to over 1,100 members by March 2001. A further 1,600 organisations joined CRIN's mailing lists. In the same period, the number of subscribers to CRINMAIL increased from 200 to 1,300.

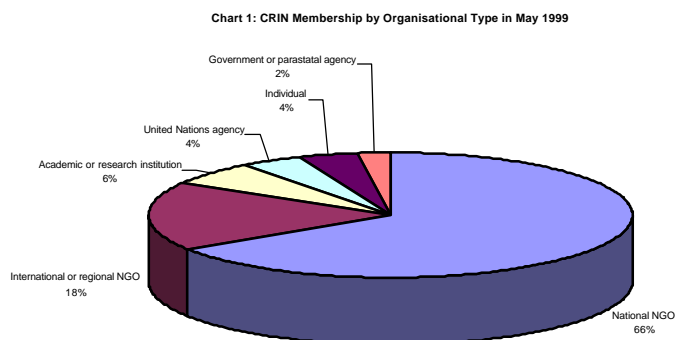
This coincided with an increased number of requests for information to the coordinating unit. The majority of CRIN's members were national NGOs (66 percent) and regional and international NGOs (18 percent) (See *Chart 1: CRIN Membership by Organisational Type in May 1999*).

There were also increased demands for specialist information on child rights; and this led to the creation of more theme desks on CRIN's website. In addition to desks on child labour, sexual exploitation, media, and national coalitions (which were available in April 1998) the following had been added by March 2001: child rights (general), armed conflict, disabilities, discrimination, education, health, HIV/AIDS, juvenile justice, macroeconomics, the UN Special Session on Children, and violence against children. The theme desk on national coalitions that was organised with the NGO Group for the CRC also evolved substantially. From 1998, it included a full-text database of NGO Alternative Reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child. The website also includes reports from NGOs to the Committee on the Rights of the Child for the day of general discussion in 2000 on the topic of State Violence against Children.

The only caveat to the growth was that CRIN's coordinating unit did not grow alongside the child rights community. CRIN was not able to realise its goal of expanding the coordinating unit to four staff including a full-time editor/information officer. CRIN's operating budget generally stayed the same between 1995 and 2001; and the coordinating unit consisted of two staff members for most of 1999-2001. Furthermore, the departure of the first Co-ordinator in August 1999 – after taking CRIN through four remarkable years– affected the stability of the coordinating unit.

Since May 2000 and the arrival of the new coordinator (the author) much effort has gone into streamlining CRIN's products. All products are being consolidated into one platform – CRIN's website – in order to strengthen the network and improve the active exchange of information, experiences and ideas. The relaunch of the site in March 2001 marks significant progress towards this goal. The following serve as examples of how CRIN products have been integrated into one platform:

- Until July 2000, CRINMAIL was open only to members. It is now an information and promotional tool, which is open for subscriptions by the public.



- Archives of CRINMAIL can be read on the website. Administration of the service has been simplified by moving this service to a free email list provider. And anyone can subscribe or unsubscribe through email or the website. The frequency of the service, which now comes in digest format, is two or three times per week.
- All new publications are included on the website; many are also announced in CRINMAIL and listed in the newsletter. This ensures information reaches members regardless of their electronic capacity.
- In November 2000, CRIN Newsletter 13 on the theme of children and macroeconomics marked a relaunch of the newsletter with new design and more in-depth coverage of the theme. It can now be downloaded from the website in Adobe Acrobat (pdf) format in English, French and Spanish. Responses to the changes have been positive. A survey sent out along with the newsletter indicated that on average 81 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the changes were an improvement.
- Five website databases have been merged in order to improve access to information. This includes information that was previously in these separate databases: publications, organisations, text, NGO alternative reports and information on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Priorities for the coming three years will include developing a participatory marketing strategy for the network in order to collect and disseminate information. The substantive content of all projects, including the theme desks, will be redeveloped through this participatory framework. CRIN will also seek to diversify membership to include more academia, government departments and other interested UN agencies.

MEETING REGIONAL AND NATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILD RIGHTS PROFESSIONALS

The strongest words of praise for CRIN often come from individuals who work in the South. One of their common complaints is that they find themselves cut off from the day-to-day decisions made at the highest levels by the UN and international NGOs in New York, Geneva and London. CRIN breaks through that silence. Yet, positive experiences highlight barriers that CRIN has been unable to overcome. This includes language, regions, and technology.

Through its partnership with NGO groups, CRIN's platform has become the original source of information for the following reports and information.

- Alternative reports submitted by NGOs and other actors to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (in partnership with the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child).
- Contact details of national coalitions around the world (in partnership with the Liaison Unit of the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child).
- Alternative reports submitted by NGOs and other actors to the Committee

for the General Day of Discussion (in partnership with the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights).

- Reports from the Child Rights Caucus that represents many NGOs involved in the preparatory process to the Special Session on Children.

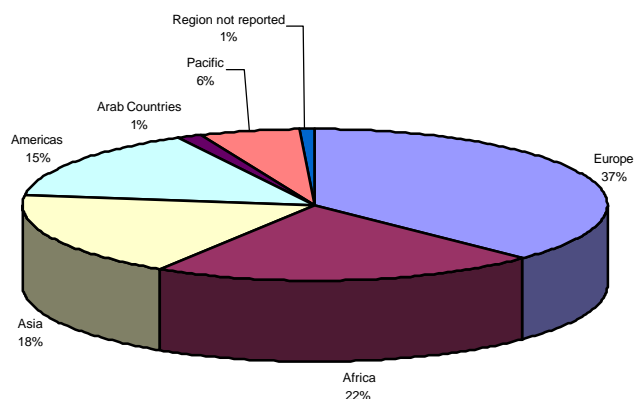
For the Special Session and its preparatory meetings, CRIN aims to facilitate networking and capacity building amongst its 1,100 member organisations in more than 100 countries. This includes providing national NGOs with more information about country and regional-level activities, as well as supporting caucuses and national coalitions and making their information more accessible throughout the child rights community. Overall CRIN is seeking to promote the importance of child rights and to increase participation and involvement in the Special Session process. CRIN's website includes details and contact information on thematic and regional caucuses; information about events at the national and regional levels; news articles and news releases about the Special Session process.

CRIN membership has grown steadily but there has been an imbalance between regions. In May 1999, there were 806 organisational and individual members (see *Chart 2: CRIN Membership by Region for May 1999*). About 22 percent of members were in Africa and 18 percent in Asia but the Latin American and Arabic regions were under-represented.

English by and large continues to dominate communications within the network - as it does the Internet in general. This is a problem that has been exacerbated by CRIN's in-house capacity. Until recently the co-ordinating unit generally has not included staff with French or Spanish skills. The language barrier has meant that a number of members cannot fully participate and share their knowledge and expertise. The recruitment in March 2001 of an Information Officer and Editor, who has French language skills, is a step in the right direction.

Both the CRIN Newsletter and CRINMAIL are translated to French and Spanish, but readership of these products is relatively small due to lack of real

Chart 2: CRIN Membership by Region for May 1999



promotion of these services. For example, in March 2000 the French edition of CRIN Newsletter 12 on the theme of Education was only 11 percent of the total print run; and the Spanish edition was only 8 percent of the total print run.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE BETWEEN NORTH AND SOUTH

The challenge of technology is as critical to CRIN as the regional and language challenges. Through its development, CRIN was committed to developing tools that were appropriate and accessible to its diverse membership, and chose to concentrate on projects that were paper-based as well as projects that were dependent on information technology. The dependency on ICTs was borne out of necessity as the rapid growth and use of these technologies could no longer be ignored. CRIN's efforts to create an information-rich website have reflected the assumption that the use of the Internet and other ICT systems will continue to grow, however unevenly.

This assumption was well founded. The success of CRINMAIL, for example, clearly grew alongside the popularity of email. By 1998 over 60 percent of CRIN's members were using email, a significant increase since 1995 when 11 percent were using email.

However, CRIN also sought to promote the full range of tools for gathering and disseminating information. The newsletter was used to offer hard copy documentation to those members without Internet access and to inform the membership of the content of CRIN's website. And the production of paper directories represented a continued commitment to share information across a range of formats.

CRIN is committed to representing its members and to mediating the evolving discussions about the 'digital divide' that is now emerging between Northern and Southern child rights organisations. Various consultations and surveys have aimed to analyse this divide and their findings are outlined here.

Issues and recommendations from the CRIN consultative meeting in Cyprus: During the discussions on information technology and hard copy documentation, participants in the consultations in Cyprus outlined key issues and recommendations:

- CRIN members experience common problems with information and communications technology. This includes: (1) information overload, (2) information scarcity, (3) lack of technical expertise to develop ICT systems, (4) lack of resources to develop ICT systems, (5) lack of resources to develop research, documentation or other information products.
- The CRIN Newsletter was identified as a very important source of information. The majority of participants regarded it the only source of information about CRIN and work on the Convention that reached smaller NGOs in the South that do not have Internet access or email.
- The application of ICTs have developed unevenly. This means that CRIN may have to support and resource potential regional partners.

- While CRIN should keep abreast of developments in information and communications technology, it must also improve its capacities in hard copy resources and use of other media. Two examples were given: (1) CRIN should concentrate on producing more hard copy information. This includes reports from conferences, (2) Information sources such as the media, grassroots organisations and the private sector should be explored. Additionally the network could make better use of oral communication and radio.
- CRIN should support capacity building and training initiatives within its regional programme. To that end, debates on the use of information as a key organisational resource should be encouraged.

Conclusion: Building a network to gather and exchange information

There can be no doubt that the 1990s will mark the time when child rights and the child rights community came of age. Progress at early phases of this period included the entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in the same month, the holding of the World Summit for Children -- one of the largest gatherings of world leaders ever to deliberate the topic of child rights. The 'web' as we know it came into being in 1992-1993, when organisations and institutions like the World Bank, United Nations and White House came online. This was the time that Mosaic took the Internet by storm; the Internet proliferated at a 341,634 percent annual growth rate of service traffic, and Gopher's growth was 997 percent^x. In 1994, the United Kingdom's Treasury office and the Japanese Prime Minister came online. The development of e-commerce sites started in 1994 and 1995.

The child rights community was very responsive to this rapid development. An international secretariat organised by DCI and Rädde Barnen was operating as a child rights information network by 1991. By March 1993 the child rights community was already discussing the need for a Documentation Unit on the Rights of the Child and a network of information and documentation relevant to its work, as well as to developing a system of computerisation^x. The formal creation of the Child Rights Information Network in 1995 was a positive development in this process that is now linking over 1,100 organisations working in child rights through email, the Internet and mail.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most universally signed human rights convention *and* in its implementation, it explicitly gives a voice internationally to NGOs. ICTs amplified this voice and enabled NGOs to work together more effectively in order to hold governments accountable as laid out in the Convention. The proliferation of ICTs has catalysed global communications; so that more than 60 percent of CRIN members now have email access.

Yet the costs of connecting to the Internet are often prohibitive for our members. A member from Kenya wrote in March 2001, for example, to say that they were silent because they "have been facing problems." They explained

that gaining access to the Internet in Kenya is not easy. Internet access is handled by business centres and they charge a lot of money. Similarly, at the CRIN Consultative Meeting in Cyprus, the African participants issued a joint statement: "The group from Africa wished to emphasise the critical importance of providing it with support and resources for capacity building so that Africa can participate fully and equally in an international network."

It becomes easy to see why the child rights community is still coming to terms with how it can best unleash its potential to promote and realise child rights. The child rights community - as reflected by CRIN's membership -- is a diverse one that includes national, regional and international NGOs, United Nations agencies, research and academic institutions and government and parastatal institutions. Language and technology barriers complicate regional differences. Additionally, for most NGOs managing information for a greater common good is still a battle to be won.

CRIN is still a very young and modest network, which is just beginning to learn how to collect and disseminate information on an international scale. CRIN has gone through three main phases of growth: Phase 1 - Feasibility of CRIN (1991-1995); Phase 2 - Set up (1995); Phase 3 - Consolidation and learning (1996-March 2001).

The initial concept of CRIN as a network that would connect information centres assumed that information was already systematically collected, processed, stored and retrievable within organisations. CRIN would simply provide the mechanisms for exchange and help to identify existing resources. In 1995, the child rights community was in fact nowhere near that position.

It is now almost six years later and, out of necessity, CRIN developed to fill that gap. CRIN works almost despite its diverse membership, which ranges from UN agencies such as UNICEF, with considerable resources at its disposal, to grassroots organisations with limited resources such as Concern for Children and Environment, Nepal. Members continue to demonstrate the will and necessity to find a common ground. This has been and remains one of the biggest challenges of all.

i This paper was presented at the International Interdisciplinary Course on Children's Rights at the University of Ghent, Belgium in December 2000. This final version is dated 11 April 2001.

ii Two optional protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, relating to children in armed conflict and the trafficking of children were adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on May 25 2000. The first protocol requires state to agree that no one under the age of 18 take direct part in hostilities or be compulsorily recruited into armed forces. It also requires states to raise the minimum age and apply strict safeguards to voluntary recruitment. The second protocol prohibits the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

iii On September 30, 1990 at the World Summit for Children, held at the United Nations, the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and Plan of Action for Implementing the World Declaration, were signed by 71 Heads of State and Governments, and later endorsed by 181 countries. 155 countries committed to the preparation of national plans of action for children. The Plan of Action established 7 major and 20 supporting goals considered achievable by the year 2000.

iv See Article 45 *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 20 November 1989 and entered into force on 2 September 1990.

v See Human Rights Internet *Children's Rights Information Sources: A listing of organisations with information on the rights of the child*, 1995. Computerisation of the organisation's information collection was used as a measure of the sophistication of information handling. The organisations that responded were divided into three categories: organisations with computerised information collections (As), organisations with information collections but not computerised information collections (Bs) and organisations without collections (Cs). A majority fitted category B, and of those in category A, just over 50 percent collected information on children but described children as a secondary focus of their work. C organisations were the smallest group, although it may be assumed that many organisations did not respond, as they did not systematically collect information.

vi Ms. Becky Purbrick was Co-ordinator of CRIN from January 1995 to the Fall of 1999. Ms. Andrea Khan (the author) took over in this role in May 2000.

vii See Child Rights Information Network *Results of the Information Needs Questionnaire prepared for the Child Rights Information Network*, 1995. Eight preliminary project proposals included:

1. Gathering and exchanging information on the interpretation and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly case studies.
2. Gathering and exchanging information on 'special protection' methods and 'civil rights and freedoms', whilst not excluding other articles in the Convention.
3. Gathering, exchanging and developing training materials on the Convention and its implementation.
4. Collecting and disseminating information on 'who is doing what' in the field of child rights, the current activities of organisations, contacts and background information.
5. Building up a knowledge of information sources and how to access and raising awareness of these sources.
6. Developing a range of services for information exchange and giving priority to developing a network newsletter and an organisational database.
7. Maintaining a range of methods of communication and developing the capacity for electronic communication.
8. Providing training and capacity support in managing, processing and disseminating information relating to child rights.

viii The evaluation was conducted by Sharon Rusu, who was the Head of Information Services and Dissemination at the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs. The consultant was asked: (1) To critically assess the overall performance of CRIN in relation to: (a) the general strategy outlined at the July 1995 Paris meeting, which formally launched the network, and (b) the activities detailed in the Phase II and Phase III project proposals for the period July 1995 to January 1998; (2) To outline a three year strategy for 1998 to strengthen the network, with particular focus on (a) the needs and contributions of member organisations; (b) network management (including the roles of the Facilitating Group, the Management Team and the co-ordinating unit; and (c) securing the necessary resources.

ix Robert Hobbes Zakon, *BHobbes' Internet Timeline* at www.zakon.org/

ix Report on the third session of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (05/03/93) report CRC/C/16, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, at www.unhcr.org

Experience since 1995 has given CRIN a very unique role within the human rights community. CRIN is the only child rights organisation that does all of the following: it works with a global network of organisations working on child rights – a wide range of actors including national, regional and international NGOs, United Nations agencies and research institutions; its products and services enable it to be a global information resource on child rights issues; and its partnerships with key NGO coalitions, groups and caucuses enable it to promote and support the implementation of child rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Yet the continual challenge for CRIN – both as a global network and global information resource – has been three-fold. This paper examines CRIN's history through three main phases, and then reviews how CRIN is now working to address these questions:

1. How to manage the specialised needs of experts working in national and international NGOs, the United Nations, and research institutions?
2. How to meet the regional and national needs of child rights professionals working in Africa, Asia, the Pacific and South America as well as Europe and North America?
3. How to bridge the digital divide that exists between North and South in order to capitalise on the global information society?

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