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International children's rights in polycrisis: interconnected pathways to social justice and a sustainable future

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Prof. dr. Ann Marie Skelton

**International children's rights in polycrisis:
Interconnected pathways to social justice and a
sustainable future**



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Bij ons leer je de wereld kennen

International children's rights in polycrisis:
Interconnected pathways to social justice and a
sustainable future

Inaugural Lecture by

Prof. dr. Ann Marie Skelton

on the acceptance of her position as
Chair in Children's Rights in a Sustainable World
at Leiden University
on 12 April 2024



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Introduction

Rector Magnificus, Executive Board, Dean and Faculty Board of Leiden Law School, Professors, esteemed colleagues, valued students, and dear friends and family. Thank you for attending this inaugural lecture marking my appointment to the Chair on Children's Rights in a Sustainable World, in the Law Faculty at the University of Leiden. It is wonderful to have you all present, whether in this grand room, or joining virtually.

International Children's rights in crisis

War, climate change, poverty and inequality, displacement. These are the crises in the polycrisis I am going to talk about today. They are not the only factors to be considered, there are broader global issues such as demographic expansion. Baby 8 billion was born in 2022, baby 9 billion will be born in 2037, and populations in East Asia, North America and Europe will have a bigger cohort of older people, while Africa's child population will grow larger. There are changing geopolitical alignments. There has been an explosion of digital technologies that already impact children's rights in profound ways and will continue to do so. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still present and have impeded progress towards the sustainable development goals (SDGs). All of these factors, amplified by the 24/7 news feed and social media, have affected the current generation of children who express fear and anxiety about the present and the future. The complex world I have sketched is the backdrop to my lecture today. I will first focus on the key crises that I have selected to discuss. I will then move on to a brief examination of what is happening in child rights discourse within the United Nations. Finally, I will navigate through tentative pathways towards improved social justice and a sustainable future.

What does polycrisis mean?

I have used the word 'polycrisis' in the title of my lecture because there are multiple crises, but many of the crises are in some ways linked to one another, and the word 'polycrisis' suggests an accumulation of inter-connected crises. Globally,

millions of children and the societies they are living in are facing concurrent, compounded shocks.

Armed conflict

Let me start with war. There is a powerful connection between war and the 20th century history of children's rights. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Geneva Declaration on Children's Rights. The genesis of that was the first world war. Eglantyne Jebb, a social reformer living in England founded Save the Children in 1919, in order to raise funds to feed starving children.¹ Interestingly the children she and her colleagues fought for were not living in countries that were allies of England. As the First World War came to an end the German and Austro-Hungarian economies came near to collapse. The children of those countries faced enormous suffering from the effects of the war and the Allied blockade prevented food and other goods from reaching those areas even after the armistice was signed.

Eglantyne refused to look away when millions of children were starving to death and she demanded solutions for children impacted by war. It was in that context, emerging from the horror of the First World War, that Eglantyne galvanized her talent and worked towards the first international instrument explicitly acknowledging children's rights, the Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child which was adopted by the League of Nations in 1924. The second world war was another reminder of what war can do to children and millions were affected. Polish child rights advocate Janusz Korczak symbolized the ultimate dedication to children's rights when he turned down an offer of sanctuary and was killed together with 190 children he had accompanied when they arrived at the Treblinka camp on August 7, 1942. No doubt, there were many other unsung heroes. As there are today, the many thousands of personnel of international agencies and humanitarian organisations who are facing huge personal risk to provide medical treatment and the essentials in war zones. They are not looking away now as children are starving to death and nor should we.

Children are currently facing brutal impacts of war all over the globe. On International Children's Day on 20 November 2023, the Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a statement in which it urged States to act to 'end the killing of children in armed conflict'. The statement described the anniversary of the Convention as 'a day of mourning' for the many children who had recently died in conflicts around the world including in Gaza, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Myanmar, Haiti, Sudan, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo and Somalia.² According to Save the Children's current research, there are 468 million children worldwide living in armed conflict zones, and this amounts to approximately 20% of the world's 2.4 billion child population. While daily news reports warn of imminent famine in Gaza, a huge crisis is unfolding in Sudan – where 3 million children under five suffer from malnutrition, and war is pushing 700 000 of those towards severe acute malnutrition. The problem with these numbers and lists of States is that the scale is mind numbing – we lose the sense of each child's suffering. 'I miss bread' was what one Gazan child said to BBC news reporters.³

Eglantyne Jebb said – 'Every war is a war against children'. She was speaking figuratively – but lately it has felt as if one can say of at least some of the current armed conflicts, that it is factually true. With regard to Gaza, more children have died than either men, or women. That is a strange war. And experienced medics in field hospitals have said that what is different about the situation in Gaza is the number of children being treated, and the severity of their injuries. One statistic that stands out for me, which was included in the Committee's 8 February 2024 statement about Gaza is this one: 'More than ten children per day, on average, have lost one or both legs in Gaza since the conflict erupted'.⁴

Killing and maiming of children is among the six grave violations of children's rights identified by the UN Security Council and monitored by its Monitoring and Reporting

Mechanisms. These are also the focus of the work of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children in Armed Conflict.⁵ That office was set up following the Global Study on Children in Armed Conflict led by Graca Machel. Dr Machel was recently awarded an honorary doctorate by this University, and less than a year ago addressed us in this Hall. The other grave violations are recruitment of children, sexual violence against children, abduction of children, and denial of humanitarian access for children. The Special Representative has recently issued a report to the Human Rights Council, in which she records deeply worrying upward trends in all of these.⁶

Children's rights issues have also featured increasingly in the work of international tribunals. With regard to Russia, the International Criminal Court has issued warrants of arrest for President Putin and the Children's Rights Commissioner, Ms Maria Lvova-Belova.⁷ The situation of children also featured in the arguments about the risk of irreparable prejudice and urgency in the case of *South Africa v Israel* in the International Court of Justice which directed Israel to take all measures within its power to prevent Genocide in Gaza.⁸ However, as we have seen, the direction has not been followed, leaving questions about the efficacy of the international legal system.

I have said a lot already, and that is only the first of the four points of polycrisis I want to talk about today.

Environmental degradation and climate change

The second crisis is arguably even bigger, from an existential point of view, and it affects all of us – it is environmental degradation and climate change. Perhaps, a decade ago I would not have included this in a talk about children's rights. But today few would be surprised to hear it said that this is a child rights issue. It is children themselves, through their activism, that have pushed this issue to the front of the child rights agenda.

In 2016, the UN Committee's Day of General Discussion was about Children's Rights and the Environment. Two years later, in 2018 the Committee held a Day of General Discussion on children as human rights defenders – at which many child activists spoke about their experiences in their work to promote their own rights, and those of others. Climate activists were among them. In September 2023 the Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted a new General Comment on Children's Rights and the Environment, with a special focus on Climate Change.⁹

The child-led movement has involved children exercising their right to protest – and the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Peaceful Assembly has flagged high levels of aggression towards child climate activists, including by State law enforcement agencies.¹⁰ UNICEF has recently issued guidance for the policing of protests involving children.¹¹ In March 2024 the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, released her report entitled 'We are not just the future – challenges faced by child and youth human rights defenders' to the Human Rights Council. The Report notes that there has been an upswing in activism in recent years, with 'new tactics and innovative campaigning reinvigorating old social movements and kickstarting new ones'.¹² She too is concerned about backlash and reprisals.

This activism also extends to access to justice. There are over 30 cases with child petitioners and applicants that have recently been brought around the world, or are currently running in the courts, including at the international level. In the case of *Sacchi v Argentina et al*, 16 children brought a complaint to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child against Argentina, Brazil, France, Germany and Turkey in protest of their failure to make sufficient greenhouse gas emission cuts.¹³ Greta Thunberg was among the petitioners. The first petitioner was Chiara Sacchi from Argentina, but the children came from states all over the world, including from small island states - the Marshall Islands and Palau. The case was ground-breaking

in many ways, and resulted in an important development in international law. I will return to the outcome of the case later, but the relevant aspect here is what the children argued in the case about the effects of climate change on their rights: The communication was supported by statements from the authors outlining how they have been personally affected by a wide range of climate impacts, including: smoke from wildfires and heat-related pollution causing some of the authors' asthma to worsen, requiring hospitalisation; the spread and intensification of vector-borne diseases resulting in malaria, dengue fever and chikungunya; exposure to extreme heat waves causing a range of adverse health effects; drought threatening the water security of some of the authors; exposure to extreme storms and flooding and threats to the indigenous authors' subsistence level of life. The authors pointed to the risk of the Marshall Islands and Palau becoming uninhabitable within decades due to sea level rise. Finally, the mental health impacts including climate anxiety resulting from climate change was a significant theme.

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The climate crisis is certainly one that is uppermost in the minds of children. It is a crisis that does not affect everyone equally, with impacts being harsher in regions where there is pre-existing poverty and inequality.

Poverty and inequality

That is the third crisis that I will highlight - poverty and inequality. An estimated 333 million children globally – or 1 in 6 – live in extreme poverty, according to a 2023 report from the World Bank. Actually, the number of children living below the international poverty line was decreasing steadily prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but this study shows that the pandemic caused these improvements to stall, and three years of progress were lost. It predicts that the sustainable development goal to end child poverty by 2030 is unlikely to be met if the current trends continue.

According to the report, Sub-Saharan Africa carries the highest burden of children – 40 per cent – living in extreme poverty,

and accounts for the largest share increase in the last decade, jumping from 54.8 per cent in 2013 to 71.1 per cent in 2022. Rapid population growth, limited social protection measures, and challenging global trends including COVID-19, conflict, and climate-related disasters, have resulted in the steep increase.

It is crystal clear that these patterns of extreme poverty, clustered in particular regions of the world, amount to huge disparities in children's opportunities to thrive and to fulfil their individual potential – extreme poverty has long lasting effects on children's physical and mental development. Inequality looms large on the global map. But even within countries, inequality affects children. The world's gini-index map show that the most unequal societies in the world today are South Africa, Namibia and Haiti.

6 Even in stable, wealthy countries, some children are living in poverty. This concern has been raised by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in relation to the United Kingdom, France and Canada, to name just a few. In December 2023 UNICEF Innocenti issued its report card on child poverty in the midst of wealth.¹⁴ Looking at child-wellbeing in OECD and EU countries, the report does provide some positive news – that there was an overall decrease of 8% in poverty levels across 40 countries, but there were still over 69 million children living in households earning 60% of the average income. What the report shows is that countries such as Poland, Slovenia, Latvia and Lithuania have managed to achieve a reduction in child poverty since 2014, while much wealthier countries in the region such as the UK, France, Iceland, Norway and Switzerland reflected an increase in the number of children living in poverty during this period.

Although I have not included the COVID-19 pandemic as a listed category in my list of crises that make up the polycrisis – we can see its effect very clearly when it comes to the entrenching of patterns of poverty and inequality.

Rapid reduction of poverty and inequality are indispensable requirements for sustainable development. The implementation of the 2030 Agenda demands a reinvigorated focus on this as part of building the resilience of children, their families and their communities.¹⁵

Displacement

The three focal points of polycrisis I have described so far also feed into the fourth one – displacement.

In June 2023 UNICEF recorded that 43,3 million children were living in 'forced displacement'.¹⁶ That included the more than 2 million children who had already been displaced by war in Ukraine, but it was before the war in Gaza, which has internally displaced approximately 800 000 children. And it does not fully capture the extent of child displacement in Sudan, which currently stands at 4 million. Globally, 19 million children have been displaced by armed conflict in recent times, the highest number ever recorded.

The numbers cause the mind to freeze over. But it is easier to grasp that the number of children forcibly displaced from their homes doubled in the last decade. Many of these are displaced within their own states, trapped within the borders, and simply surviving away from the vortex of danger that drove them and their families to move.

Conflict and violence is certainly the biggest driver of displacement, but extreme weather events such as the floods in Pakistan and the drought in the horn of Africa have also featured. Climate related displacement is projected to increase.

What we have to remember is that displacement causes many children to miss out on education, on health care (including routine vaccinations), and prevents them from accessing social protection. Many children are spending large periods of their childhood in this state of limbo.

Migration, which is also often perceived as a crisis by receiving states, is driven by all of these factors, but also by people, including children themselves travelling unaccompanied, who are seeking a better life. Migration need not be seen as a crisis, it can be an opportunity – but it is true that when large numbers of children migrate with their families, receiving states often fail to provide the necessary services. So viewed from a child-rights perspective, the number of child migrants not receiving adequate access to education, health care and social services, and those at risk of statelessness can be viewed as a major child rights concern in many countries. And as we all know, attitudes towards migration are driving a negative anti-rights agenda in many receiving nations.

Explosion of digital technologies

So far, I have described 4 crises in children's rights today – which are inter-related to one another. The explosion of digital technologies is a factor that I would describe not as a crisis in itself, but it is already influencing the current picture of children's rights – in both positive and negative ways. The developments in this field, including in the rise of artificial intelligence, are difficult to predict, and require us to remain agile in our assessment of risks and opportunities. The Committee on the Rights of the Child dedicated its General Comment no 25 to the important topic of children's rights in relation to the digital environment.¹⁷ The General Comment strived to find a balance between the empowering possibilities of digital technologies, while calling for strengthening of safeguards to ensure children's safe navigation through the use of technologies, and also to prevent abuse or exploitation through the use of technologies by states or businesses.

In the United Nations

What I have discussed up to here is the crisis and the context 'writ large'.

But there are some smaller 'alarm signals' that are animating discourse in children rights in parts of the world the world

– both outside and inside of the negotiating spaces of the United Nations. This is being referred to as 'pushbacks' against children's rights. It is part of a broader human rights regression and shrinking of civic space.

Within the United Nations there is a strange dissonance between the norm clarification world of the treaty bodies and special procedures, which is led by independent experts, and the norm clarification world of the Human Rights Council and General Assembly – which is led by States. While the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Special Rapporteurs who work on children's rights as part of their mandate continue to advance the child rights project, there is a perceptible regression on certain issues among the States.

Civil and political rights of children are under attack, as we see States seeking to subjugate children's rights within a prioritisation of parental rights and the sanctity of 'the family'. UNICEF CEO Catherine Russel has described it like this: 'Children's rights that are perceived as challenging patriarchal structures, gender norms and parental authority are at heightened risk. These include civil and political rights ... reproductive and sexual health rights ... the right to be protected against domestic violence ... and the rights of LGBTQI+ children.'

The concept of 'children as rights holders' is coming under pressure as States debate the omnibus resolution on the Rights of the Child, tabled on an annual basis both in the Human Rights Council and the Third Committee of the General Assembly. In response to this, the Committee issued a short statement on article 5 of the Convention in 2023,¹⁸ which deals with the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents to guide children in the exercise of their rights, within the understanding that as their capacity evolves, they require less and less guidance.¹⁹

What is interesting also is that strong (but unlikely) alliances have been formed between states that share views on gender issues and family values, including between the Russian Federation, the United States, the Holy See, Islamic States, some states within the EU, and many African states. These are unusual alignments of States. This kind of multilateralism erodes rather than promotes children's rights.

What are the pathways to social justice and a sustainable future?

My speech has been a rather sombre one. I would have preferred to be in a celebratory mood. I have observed that multilateralism seems to be failing children, both at the mega level, and in the gritty detail of the text of resolutions. However, we still need to find global solutions to these global problems.

8 I remain cautiously optimistic that we can find pathways towards a future that is positive for children's rights, and that can lead us on a path of recovery out of the current polycrisis towards a more sustainable future for children's rights.

The sustainable development goals (SDGs) garnered significant support from the international community, but as we have seen, the current and recent crises in the world have set us back on the likely achievement of those targets. A report of the Secretary General entitled 'Our Common Agenda' was issued in 2021, just as the world was emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic. It outlined a new vision for international cooperation. This has fed into the next big step for the United Nations – which is the Summit of the Future which takes place in the UN Headquarters in New York in September this year. It is billed as a 'once in a generation opportunity' to rebuild trust and revitalize multi-lateralism. Its hardcopy outcome will be the Pact for the Future.

So starting with the most difficult topic – children affected by armed conflict. The UN Security Council's call on 25 March

2024, for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, after several earlier attempts had failed, seemed like a positive sign of a shift in multi-lateralism. However, the fact that this resolution had by the end of March 2024 (when this speech was written), been ignored by Israel leaves a huge question mark over whether the UN system actually has any real influence in today's world. Together with the lack of compliance with the direction of the International Court of Justice, the question may be posed as to whether international law continues to hold sway. But while an inaugural lecture may be a good opportunity to enter that philosophical debate, I choose to stay with the pragmatic.

When the current fighting stops, in Gaza, in Ukraine, in Sudan, everywhere, anywhere, the task of recovery begins. The broken lives and bodies and minds of children will have to be rebuilt and nurtured. It will be a massive task, and the world must not look away. It is in all of our interests to ensure that the loss and suffering caused by these armed conflicts are catalyzers for a recommitment to children's rights, as the first and second world wars were.

The zero draft of the Pact for the Future promises to focus on preventive measures – to prevent war and to stave off the threats of nuclear confrontation and 'new and more dangerous forms of war'. These aims are important, but seem strangely disconnected from the work of peacemaking and recovery that lies ahead if we are to ensure children's development in the aftermath of the current conflicts. We need a clearer roadmap for this task.

In fact, we need a completely new roadmap to find the pathways to lead us out of all these crises, and it can't be a linear map. It will need to trace new connections, new interconnections, that cross boundaries in many ways. International law has traditionally been restricted by the geographical boundaries of sovereign states. With regard to accountability, it has been broadly understood that States are responsible for the rights violations that occur within their

jurisdiction, which has primarily been equated with their ‘territory’.²⁰ However, case law has developed the recognition of extraterritorial jurisdiction in certain circumstances, although these mostly refer to situations where the state exercises effective control of an area abroad,²¹ or where the state exercises control over individuals.²²

However, new situations are demanding new answers, and two decisions of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, received under its complaints procedure,²³ might be described as shifting the signposts at these long-standing boundaries.

The first case dealt with a group of children affected by armed conflict. The applicants sought the repatriation to France of their grandchildren who were living with their mothers who were connected to the ISIS foreign fighter phenomenon, in the camps in North East Syria.²⁴ The French government argued that they were not responsible as the children were not within their jurisdiction. Time does not permit a lengthy discussion of the case. Ultimately, the Committee crossed new boundaries in its extraterritorial jurisprudence by finding, in the particular circumstances of the case, that the children were within the jurisdiction of the State because France had ‘the capability and the power to protect the children in question by taking action to repatriate them or provide other consular responses’. The factors considered included the children’s vulnerability, the deplorable conditions in the camps, the fact that effective control was held by a non-state actor that had said it had neither the means nor the will to look after the children in the camps and expected the detainees’ countries of nationality to repatriate them.

The decision is not without its critics.²⁵ Helen Duffy, expresses disappointment that the fact-bound approach of the Committee avoided creating a more replicable set of principles. However, she describes the decision as bold and holistic, moving beyond formal and rigid distinctions to accept factual and legal factors as being sufficient to establish a nexus between the state and individuals outside of the state.²⁶

Sacchi v Argentina and others, is the case about climate change I mentioned earlier.²⁷ The case was ultimately found inadmissible for technical reasons that are not relevant to this discussion. What is relevant, is the fact that several of the children were living outside the borders of the countries against which the cases were brought. They argued that this was no bar to jurisdiction. The Committee upheld their claim regarding jurisdiction, observing that under article 2 of the CRC, states have the obligation to respect and ensure the rights of ‘each child within their jurisdiction’ but that that ‘territory’ is not mentioned in that article. From here on the Committee took a different approach to jurisdiction from the previous case, due to the fact that the nature of jurisdiction and transboundary harms is very specific in climate change cases. Simply described, the Committee found that country A can be held liable for carbon emissions that occur within its territory, which cause harm to children in country B, provided that there is a sufficient causal link between the action/omission of the state and the reasonably foreseeable harm.

The important idea that connects these two cases is this: The world is connected. I find direction here from the work of Leiden Professor Jan Aart Scholte. An expert on global governance, he invites us to think beyond international relations, or international law, but rather to seek global solutions to global problems. He describes globality as ‘transplanetary social connectivity’.²⁸ This means that globality involves individuals and groups engaging and impacting one another, no matter where they are on the globe.

What other boundaries might a global approach transcend? The Committee on the Rights of the Child’s General Comment number 26 on Children’s Rights and the Environment with a special focus on climate change makes the point that the full realization of children’s rights depends in part on how States interact with one another. Climate change is a threat that requires states to work together, calling for the widest possible cooperation. The general comment spells out that

the obligations of each State depends on its situation – ‘in the context of climate change such obligations are appropriately guided by taking into account the historical and current emissions of greenhouse gases and the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities’. Of course this is not new, it is already included in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Paris Agreement and Human Rights Council Resolutions.²⁹ The General Comment argues that states should prioritise children in their international environmental finance and assistance programmes and ensure that environmental measures and finance mechanisms ‘respect, protect and proactively seek to fulfil children’s lives.’³⁰ The General Comment recognises loss and damage as ‘a third pillar of climate actions, along with mitigation and adaptation.’ Children and young people were very active at COP 28, where delegates agreed to formally establish a loss and damage fund to support the most impacted countries dealing with the effects of climate change. The idea is that governments and the private sector should all contribute to this fund. Of course, there is still a very long way to go, but this may signal a commitment to an increased and holistic recognition of global connectedness.

Could this approach also spill over into dealing with some of the other crises that children are facing? Is it possible to infuse the idea of holistic global connectedness to alleviating poverty and inequality? If some of these bigger issues are solved, then displacement would arguably be less likely.

So if we acknowledge the connectedness of states – what about another frontier that children have also been advancing lately – that of the connectedness between current and future generations. It is an entire subject on its own, and limited time will only permit me to make a couple of observations about it. People often equate children with ‘the future’ – it is important to acknowledge that children are rights holders in the here and now. Nevertheless, experts drafting the Maastricht Principles on the Rights of Future Generations have stated that ‘[c]hildren and youth are closest in time to generations

still to come and thus occupy a unique position, and have an important role to play, within this transition to long-term, multigenerational thinking. Accordingly, their perspectives and participation in decision-making with respect to long-term and intergenerational risks must be accorded special weight’.³¹

So this underscores the logic for the demand by children and young people for a seat at the decision making table. This is given detailed attention in paragraph 22 of the Maastricht Principles where there is direct recognition of the right to be heard – which is protected under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and their ‘proximate position to future generations’ should be respected when they advocate on behalf of themselves and future generations.

So is children’s rights dialogue also a space where we are open to a future-looking concept of social justice? Not just people connected to each other and states connected to each other, but people living now, connected to and preserving the planet for the people who will live in the future. With children as our ambassadors, because they will live longest, and are proximate to future generations. This is what children are telling us.

I am coming to the end of the lecture now. I have painted a picture of polycrisis, I have given examples where current multilateralism appears to be failing children. But I end by asking: Does the Pact for the Future, if it gives sufficient recognition to children’s rights, give us a chance to reignite multilateralism, or to reach beyond it to a new holistic globalism. Do the learnings within children’s rights jurisprudence enable us to imagine global solutions that transcend boundaries? These are questions I intend to add to the Leiden Law Faculty’s Research Framework ‘Effective protection of fundamental rights in a pluralist world’.

I invite all faculties and institutes at Leiden University, and all academics everywhere who are interested in finding answers

to these questions to think along with us. I want to leave with the thought that children deserve our efforts to advance a vision of children's rights that also revitalises the way that people connect within and across society, the manner that states connect to each other, and the form in which current generations connect to future generations, within a caring concept of social justice.

The final words are those of thanks. Thank you to the Executive Board, the Deans, the Faculty Board at Leiden Law School – I appreciate your trust in providing me with a chair, so that I may sit and think, within a great academy among creative thinkers. I want to say a special thanks to my close colleagues, and I single out my colleague, Professor Ton Liefwaard, for special mention. I have many dear colleagues and friends here today, too many to mention by name. Thanks for the ongoing warmth, encouragement and support from all of you, and from my husband and sons.

Ik heb gezegd.

Noten

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Professor Ann Skelton is an internationally renowned child rights expert. She is a Professor of Law at Leiden University, where she holds the Chair in Children's Rights in a Sustainable World. She was the first holder of the Rotating Honorary Chair: Enforcement of Children's Rights at Leiden University, and she is the Programme Director of the Advanced Masters in International Children's Rights.

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Ann was elected as a member of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2017, and was appointed Chairperson in May 2023, for a two year term.

Ann Skelton has previously worked as a children's rights lawyer in South Africa for over 30 years. She played a leading role in child law reform through her involvement with the committees of the South African Law Reform Commission that drafted the Child Justice Act and the Children's Act. Ann was the Director of the Centre for Child Law for ten years, where she initiated its strategic impact litigation work, and appeared as counsel in many landmark child law cases in the South African superior courts, including 12 cases in the Constitutional Court.

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