The money in Ghana has always been down on the coast. Poor religious and tribal minorities live in the North, where Ibrahim was born. Orphaned at the age of nine, Ibrahim set off with his uncle in search of work. They followed rumors to the gold mines in Ashanti state, expecting to be paid well. The jobs in the big company mines sounded perfect: training, equipment, a regular salary, and sometimes even housing were provided. Employees could even access medical care if they needed it. But when Ibrahim and his uncle reached the mining town of Obuasi, they found no jobs. Because they lacked the requisite education and recommendations, mining companies firmly turned away the two travelers. Unemployed and without any friends in the area, Ibrahim and his uncle became extremely hungry. Ibrahim’s uncle looked everywhere for work and soon both he and his nephew fell into the hands of a gangster. He led a mining operation at a hidden deep shaft mine where gold, chiseled out by hand, was hauled to the surface one bag at a time on the backs of men and boys. Ibrahim’s uncle was enlisted into an eight-person gang and advanced a little money to buy food. Too small for the hard work of hauling bags of stone, Ibrahim ran errands, fetched tools, and hauled the occasional load of rock. While his uncle kept him out of the deep mine where cave-ins were common, Ibrahim’s life was no picnic. Everyone felt free to use Ibrahim as they liked, and small mistakes on his part led to beatings, sometimes with the flat side of a machete. He became the victim of the hunger and frustration that the workers felt.

After three months, the slavery trap closed. It came time for the gang organizer, a local gold buyer, to settle up with Ibrahim’s uncle and the other migrant workers in the gang. The gold buyer told them that the advance of money, in addition to the other food and tools that had been provided over three months, far exceeded their share of the gold they had extracted from the mine. When the “normal” interest of 50 percent was added to the debt, it grew into what was for them a huge sum. “Don’t worry,” said the gold buyer, “you’ll get lucky with some rich ore soon and make plenty to pay me back. Meanwhile, I’ll advance you a little more so you’ll have the food to keep working.”

Given that they had not made enough to pay their debt, the workers even felt lucky that the gold-buyer was willing to keep them on. They felt they had no choice but agree to 50 percent interest accruing every three months. With harder work, they reasoned, they could pay off their debts easily. So they began again, working even harder and decreasing expenditures by consuming only one meal a day.

Ibrahim and his uncle had fallen into one of the most common traps that lead to slavery today. The combination of their desperation, what seems to be legitimate work, a sense of personal honor, and a snowballing debt drew them tightly under the control of a slaveholder. The trap closed fully when they learned that attempting to leave the mine...
would be met with violence. Under the violent control of another person, lacking freewill, being economically exploited, and paid nothing, just after his tenth birthday, Ibrahim was a slave.

Even though 2008 was the 200th anniversary year of the abolition of the slave trade in the United States, slavery is still found elsewhere and has turned up in surprising places. The trade may have been outlawed, but the practice still reaches into our homes and businesses, perhaps more than even than is acknowledged. Most of us learn about modern slavery from the heart-wrenching stories of individuals like Ibrahim enslaved in the developing world, trafficked into prostitution, or forced labor in the West. But there is a larger, historic account that scholars and activists are only now uncovering as they explore the role of slavery in the global economy.

With the end of the Cold War, human trafficking and slavery have experienced a revival in business. At the same time, a global anti-slavery movement of grassroots human rights groups is emerging. National governments, regional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States, and the United Nations have all enacted new laws and conventions to combat this epidemic. The viral nature of the innovation of slavery has necessitated the development of these new approaches. And while fighting slavery poses a challenging problem for policy makers, economists, law enforcement officials, and those who care for slavery’s survivors, their efforts are encouraged by research that suggests the potential for substantially curbing this societal tragedy.

**Slavery in a Modern Context**

The United Nations reports that human trafficking is now the third largest moneymaker for criminals, after drugs and weapons. No one knows how many people were enslaved 50 years ago, but the number is thought to have grown rapidly since then due to the population explosion, resulting in a figure reaching an estimated 27 million today. The increase in slavery, both in our communities and in the things we buy, is also linked to economic globalization. But this is not about sweatshop workers existing on miserly wages. Slaves are under the complete violent control of another person; they are economically exploited and receive only enough food and shelter to keep them alive. For millions of victims their experiences differ little from slaves of ancient history.

The only thing truly new about modern slavery is the dramatic fall in slave prices over the past fifty years. For nearly all of recorded history slaves have been expensive, capital purchases. Over the past 3,500 years the price of slaves has averaged around US$40,000 in today’s money even as the supply ebbed and flowed. But since about 1950, a glut of potential slaves has entered the market and the average price for a human life has collapsed to an all-time low of less than US$100. The supply of potential slaves is especially plentiful among the one billion people who live on about a dollar a day. In countries where high levels of official corruption mean that criminals can act with impunity, and the rule of law fails to protect the vulnerable, the poor are easily tricked or forced into slavery.

With the growth of global markets, some of these slaves are used to produce many of our basic commodities. In Brazil, for example, slaves cut down forests and burn the wood into charcoal that is then used to make steel. The United States imports over half a million tons of Brazilian steel each year to produce everything from toys to cars to office buildings. Slavery is in our fruit bowls and fridges too. There are documented cases of slaves being used to grow or harvest coffee, cocoa, sugar, beef, tomatoes, lettuce, apples, and other fruit. The list goes on: shrimp and other fish products are touched by slavery, as are cotton, gold, tin, diamonds, jewelry and bangles, tantalum (a mineral used in cell phones and laptops), shoes, sporting goods, clothing, fireworks, and rice. Recently in southern Florida, one of the largest-ever federal anti-slavery cases involved dozens of workers who picked tomatoes and oranges under guard. The produce was destined for major restaurant chains and grocery stores in the United States.

However, in contrast to the slavery of the past, while a large number of goods are tainted by modern slavery, only a very small proportion of any particular commodity has slave input. If American pre-Civil War cotton was primarily a slave-made good, the proportion of today’s global cotton harvest touched by slaves may be one or two percent at most. According to a recent estimate from the International Labor Organization, the profits of human trafficking and forced labor fall in the range of US$31.6 billion. Such a figure is sizeable, but it only represents a drop in the global economic ocean.

*Above: Slave laborers in Brazil working in the Amazon basin listen to a government official explain their rights. Opposite: Paid workers cart bricks at a kiln in central China.*
This challenges businesses and consumers. Cocoa, for example, is grown on more than 600,000 small farms in the Ivory Coast, a country that produces about half of the good’s world supply. Yet only a small fraction of those farms use slaves. Young men, normally from poor neighboring countries like Mali, come to the Ivory Coast looking for work. In remote rural areas some are tricked and enslaved by unscrupulous labor brokers and farmers. But in the West African cocoa supply chain, European and North American companies are not allowed to buy directly from the farmers. Instead, the supply filters through a series of middlemen and shippers before reaching the coast for export. The profits from slave labor are taken at the farm gate and not passed on to middlemen or processors. The global market sets the cocoa price, and farmers get the same proportion of that price whether they use slaves or not. Given the tiny fraction of farmers using slaves, their lowered labor cost doesn’t pull down the market price; it just increases their profits. For that reason, boycotts of products like cocoa can actually make things worse by hurting the majority of farmers who do not use slaves.

In South Asia especially, hereditary debt bondage slavery is common. Loans are made to families suffering financial crisis (a crop failure, for example) and since the family has no other assets, they pledge themselves and all their future work as collateral until the loan is repaid. Since the moneylender now controls the family and owns all of their productive labor, it is impossible for them to accumulate assets needed to repay the debt. Trapped, the debt is passed from one generation to the next; up to 10 million people are thought to be held in what is known as hereditary collateral debt bondage slavery in India, Pakistan, and Nepal. A variant of this mechanism of enslavement ensnared Ibrahim, his uncle, and thousands of others in the illegal gold mines in Ghana.

**Anti-Slavery Trends**

Opposing the spread of bondage today is an emerging anti-slavery movement. This campaign confronts challenges both similar and very different to those faced at the origins of abolition in 1787. In that year, twelve men met above a printing and bookshop in London. The group planned to bring down an empire’s legal slave trade, equivalent in global reach and capital to the automobile industry of today. Aligned against them were the most powerful forces of the Empire. The Church of England, for example, owned one of the largest slaveholding plantations in Barbados. That the abolitionists succeeded in their mission in a mere twenty years is almost unbelievable, especially given that their victory cost the British economy large sums extending over decades. The victory of March 1807, ending the slave trade in the Empire was the first of many more: the ending of legal slavery in 1833; the campaigns leading to the abolition of slavery in the Americas by 1888; and the international Congo Antislavery Campaign at the beginning of the 20th century.

By the end of the nineteenth century, slavery was illegal in most countries with functioning legal systems. But making slavery illegal did not make it go away, just as we see today. The League of Nations and subsequently the United Nations were presented with repeated cases of slavery and human trafficking. The hereditary forms of debt bondage slavery in South Asia were relatively untouched by colonial administrations, laws passed by new national governments, or international conventions. Since 1950, factors as diverse as war, environmental destruction, corrupt governments, epidemic disease, and ethnic cleansing, all factors that disrupt the rule of law, have made populations more vulnerable to enslavement. When the end of the Cold War brought down barriers between states, the trade in people accelerated.

Since the 1980s, slavery seems to have grown more

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**A Global Epidemic**

*Percentage of victims from other regions, by country (2005-2007)*

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United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2008
quickly than our understanding of its size and reach. But as cases of human trafficking and slavery surfaced in London, Paris, and New York, the official response was meager. In the United States this is a crime that, as a rule, goes unpunished. A strong federal law, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, was passed in 2000. This law was exceptional in that it decriminalized victims of human trafficking, meaning that they would not be deported for illegally entering the country as well as setting high sentences for traffickers. But a significant disparity in our response is reflected in a remarkable parallel in American crime rates. If we accept the government’s estimates, there are about 17,000 people trafficked into slavery in the United States in any given year; coincidentally there are also about 17,000 people murdered in the United States each year. Obviously, murder is the ultimate crime, but slavery comes a close second, especially considering the other crimes associated with it, such as rape and assault. The national success rate in solving murder cases is about 70 percent; around 11,000 murders are “cleared” each year. But according to the Attorney General’s 2007 report on human trafficking, the annual percentage of trafficking and slavery cases solved is less than one percent. If 14,500 to 17,500 people were newly enslaved in America in 2006, in the same year the Department of Justice brought charges against only 111 people for human trafficking and slavery.

Industry, meanwhile, is making some progress independent of government. The Cocoa Protocol, an agreement between the European and North American chocolate industry and human rights groups and trade unions, is aimed at removing slave labor from the cocoa supply chain. The agreement, signed in May 2002, set up systems to inspect and certify cocoa at source, while mounting programs to rescue slaves and young people caught in the worst forms of child labor, as well as educating farmers. There is currently no legal requirement for companies to police their supply chain, but more than US$15 million has already been donated by the chocolate industry to anti-slavery projects on the ground in West Africa through an innovative joint stakeholder foundation, the International Cocoa Initiative. This model of cooperation is now being explored by other industries whose supply chains are touched by slavery.

Looking into the Future

The good news about modern slavery is that, possibly for the first time in human history, it appears that the problem can be eradicated. There exists an interesting paradox about the 27 million slaves in the world. While it may be the largest number of slaves to ever live at one point in human history, it is also the smallest fraction of the human population to ever be in slavery. Likewise, while slaves pump around US$30 billion a year into the global economy, this is the smallest fraction of the global economy ever to be represented by slave labor. With laws against it in every country, and the lack of any large vested economic interest supporting it, slavery can be ended when the public, international agencies, and governments make it a priority. Based on analysis of anti-slavery projects in South Asia and West Africa, the current estimated cost of the global eradication of slavery is between US$10 and US$20 billion over a 25-year period.

No single “silver bullet” policy can end slavery. Instead, a collection of policies, the investment of time, and resources will all be necessary to accomplish this worthy end. Primary among these is that national governments resource and enforce their anti-slavery laws. Brazil furnishes a very positive example of what can happen when a country takes slavery seriously. After the establishment of a Commission for the Eradication of Slavery in Brazil, well-trained mobile anti-slavery squads began to follow up reports of enslavement. Soon the number of those freed was topping 4,000 per year. At the same time, a “dirty list” of all firms and individuals found to be using slave labor was established in Portuguese and English on the Internet. For businesses, the Cocoa Protocol represents another approach that has proven effective in removing slavery from both farms and the subsequent product chain. International development agencies can address the bondage that holds back millions of workers by applying a “slavery lens” to their work in much the same way as they successfully applied a “gender lens” in the past. These are just a few of the needed policies. They and others are needed to augment and support the immediate and crucial work of grassroots anti-slavery organizations that are bringing people to freedom every day, whether by organizing communities, fostering micro credit, or literally kicking down doors and rescuing slaves.

More good news comes from the fact that money spent on ending slavery is more an investment than a donation. Freed slaves know how to work, and they quickly begin to build assets, judging from the evaluation of anti-slavery projects. They also become what they have never been allowed to be: consumers who can buy food, clothing and education for their children. In areas with extensive slavery, liberation leads to economic growth. If we can connect the legal and economic dots, we can reasonably look to a future without slavery. Some of our strongest allies in ending slavery will be freed slaves. As more are liberated they will help guide us to better detection and better reintegration.