Slavery: The Blame Game

Africa, slavery and the blame game

Many years ago, I went to graduate school with a bright young man from Ghana. One morning, during a class discussion about slavery, he turned to another history student—an African-American woman—and announced, “You know, my people sold your people.”

The class broke into laughter, because we assumed he was kidding. But here in Ghana, it’s no joke. Slavery evokes a complex set of emotions that can surprise Western visitors. On the one hand, Ghanaians regard slavery as one of the great crimes in human history; on the other, they’re proud that their own ancestors were not slaves. And that, in turn, raises the dicey question of who sold whom—and who should take the blame.

The most obvious answer is the European colonial powers, who bought and transported an estimated 12 million Africans over four centuries. One million to two million probably died during the so-called Middle Passage across the Atlantic.

But Africans had practiced slavery for hundreds of years before white people got here. Most slaves were women, working as servants or concubines. They could become members of their owners’ families, which frequently freed them after several generations of bondage.

The arrival of Europeans—and, especially, of new consumer goods—changed slavery forever. Eager to obtain guns, liquor and other Western products, Africans engaged in widespread raids that brought millions of captives to slave castles on the coast. These raids generated new wars across the continent, which in turn generated fresh supplies of slaves. “Wars make gold scarce but negroes plenty,” a 17th-century trader wrote.

But Ghanaians still bridle at the idea that their own forefathers were implicated in slavery. In 2006, Canadian Gov. Gen. Michaelle Jean—the first person of African descent to hold her post—sparked outrage here when she argued that Africans should apologize for the part they played in the trade.

But Ghanaians were even more offended by reports that then-President John Kufour had agreed to Jean’s request. As one newspaper editorialized, any such apology would represent a “recreation of imperialism, which always seeks to blame the victims.”

Kufour waded into these muddy waters again in 2007, during the bicentennial of the British abolition of the slave trade. Addressing demands that Europeans pay reparations for slavery, Kufour suggested that Africans’ own complicity in the trade made such payments inappropriate.

This time, too, reaction was swift and sharp. “All Africans and their descendants have been and continue to this day to be predatory victims of the European culture,” one critic raged. Under Kufour’s logic, he added, “drug barons should not have their assets confiscated … because drug addicts are partly responsible for these crimes.”

But this argument actually diminishes Africans, all in the guise of defending them. Hardly passive victims of a grand imperial plot, Africans participated in the slave trade for the same reason that Europeans did: They thought they could profit from it. And they were right, alas, no matter how wrong it looks in retrospect.

Even as they portray Africa as a victim of the slave trade, meanwhile, Ghanaians also emphasize they do not descend from slaves themselves. When President Obama visited Ghana in 2009, for example, newspapers proudly noted that he—like most Ghanaians—came from “free” rather than “slave” stock.

“The 44th President of the United States had a Kenyan Luo father who went to study in America where he married a white woman,” one columnist wrote. “Obama’s skin coloration did not link his ancestry to the dehumanizing trade started in the 17th Century.”

Into the present, “slave” is one of the worst things you can call someone in Ghana. It conjures the millions dragged away in the ships, never to be seen again. But they loom heavily in the Ghanaian conscience, nevertheless, a lasting reminder of a complicity that becomes ever more apparent whenever it is denied.

None of this suggests that Europeans and Africans should bear equal responsibility for the enormous tragedy of trans-Atlantic slavery. Colonialism converted a small-scale, family-centered practice into a hellish global network for the transport, sale, and exploitation of human beings. Africans collaborated in the new system, to be sure, but they didn’t create or control it. White people did.

But many different peoples—of many different colors and cultures—got their hands dirty with slavery. That’s important, too, because it reminds us of our shared duty to challenge other kinds of injustice today. In Africa, for example, an estimated 200,000 children are sold by their parents into unpaid servitude. Here in Ghana, a fisherman can buy children for $30 to $50 each; these “assistants” are forced into lakes to untangle nets, risking injury and death. They are, in essence, slaves. And we must not forget them, either.

That’s why Barack and Michelle Obama brought their two daughters to a slave castle in Ghana, back in 2009. “Hopefully one of the things that was imparted to them during this trip is their sense of obligation to fight oppression and cruelty wherever it appears,” President Obama told an audience outside the castle. Amen to that, no matter what your ancestors did. Or mine.

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Facing the Whole Truth About the Atlantic Slave Trade

On June 21, 2007, the Freedom Schooner Amistad began an 18-month "Atlantic Freedom Tour" to retrace the route of the Atlantic slave trade. Owned and operated by AMISTAD America, Inc., the recreated Amistad will visit ports in Canada, England, the United States and West Africa to commemorate the story of the 1839 Amistad revolt and to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the international slave trade in England (1807) and the U.S. (1808). AMISTAD America is an educational organization committed to:

> improved relationships between races and cultures by acknowledging our common experiences and encouraging dialogue that is based upon respect. … the re-created Amistad…serves as a floating classroom, icon and as a monument to the millions of souls that were broken or lost as a result of the insidious Transatlantic Slave Trade. The vessel offers an important message for all Americans about our collective history and future.

The AMISTAD America website stresses the need to educate the public about the history of slavery "through common experiences and dialogue." By "confronting the past" and promoting "reconciliation and social healing" the Amistad's Atlantic Freedom Tour aims to help all people work toward "transforming the future."

However, confronting the history of the Atlantic slave trade requires more than a sentence acknowledging that the Amistad prisoners "had been captured in Africa by Africans who sold them to European slave traders." Website readers must understand that this terrible traffic in millions of human beings had been, as affirmed by the PBS Africans in America series, a joint venture: "During this era, Africans and Europeans stood together as equals, companions in commerce and profit. Kings exchanged respectful letters across color lines and addressed each other as colleagues. Natives of the two continents were tied into a common economy."

Incomplete depictions of the Atlantic slave trade are, in fact, quite common. My 2003 study of 49 state U.S. history standards revealed that not one of these guides to classroom content even mentioned the key role of Africans in supplying the Atlantic slave trade. In Africa itself, however, the slave trade is remembered quite differently. Nigerians, for example, explicitly teach about their own role in the trade:

> Where did the supply of slaves come from? First, the Portuguese themselves kidnapped some Africans. But the bulk of the supply came from the Nigerians. These Nigerian middlemen moved to the interior where they captured other Nigerians who belonged to other communities. The middlemen also purchased many of the slaves from the people in the interior . . . . Many Nigerian middlemen began to depend totally on the slave trade and neglected every other business and occupation. The result was that when the trade was abolished [by England in 1807]

> these Nigerians began to protest. As years went by and the trade collapsed such Nigerians lost their sources of income and became impoverished.

In Ghana, politician and educator Samuel Sulemana Fuseini has acknowledged that his Asante ancestors accumulated their great wealth by abducting, capturing, and kidnapping Africans and selling them as slaves. Likewise, Ghanaian diplomat Kofi Awoonor has written: “I believe there is a great psychic shadow over Africa, and it has much to do with our guilt and denial of our role in the slave trade. We too are blameworthy in what was essentially one of the most heinous crimes in human history.”

In 2000, at an observance attended by delegates from several European countries and the United States, officials from Benin publicized President Mathieu Kerekou’s apology for his country’s role in “selling fellow Africans by the millions to white slave traders.” “We cry for forgiveness and reconciliation,” said Luc Gnacadja, Benin’s minister of environment and housing. Cyrille Oguin, Benin’s ambassador to the United States, acknowledged, “We share in the responsibility for this terrible human tragedy.”

A year later, Senegal’s president Abdoulaye Wade, “himself the descendant of generations of slave-owning [and slave-trading] African kings,” urged Europeans, Americans, and Africans to acknowledge publicly and teach openly about their shared responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade. Wade’s remarks came months after the release of Adanggaman , by Ivory Coast director Roger Gnoan M’bala, “the first African film to look at African involvement in the slave trade with the West.” “It’s up to us,” M’Bala insisted, “to talk about slavery, open the wounds of what we’ve always hidden and stop being puerile when we put responsibility on others . . . . In our own oral tradition, slavery is left out purposefully because Africans are ashamed when we confront slavery. Let’s wake up and look at ourselves through our own image.” “It is simply true,” declared Da Bourdia Leon of Burkina Faso’s Ministry of Culture and Art, “We need this kind of film to show our children this part of our history, that it happened among us. Although I feel sad, I think it is good that this kind of thing is being told today.”

Several television productions of the last decade have acknowledged these facts: Africans in America (PBS, 1998), Wonders of the African World (PBS, 1999), and The African Trade (History Channel International, 2000). The latter begins with the visit by a group of African-Americans to the infamous slave castle and Door of No Return on Goree Island off the coast of Senegal. “Appalled by the cruelties of the Europeans,” the narrator relates, “the visitors become curious as to how Africans fell into their hands.” Their African guide admits that “this history is difficult to tell and hard to believe” but pulls no punches about African complicity in kidnapping and selling millions of African people: “All the tribes were involved in the slave trade—no exemptions.” The African-Americans were staggered: “So we really can’t blame the Europeans,” one declares, “We sold our own. It takes two.” Another visitor declares, “That’s right—money and greed.” The program concludes that “white guilt can never be erased”—but cautions that it is also important to remember that “black participation lets no one off the hook.”

The historical record is incontrovertible—as documented in the PBS Africans in America series companion book:

> The white man did not introduce slavery to Africa . . . . And by the fifteenth century, men with dark skin had become quite comfortable with the concept of man as property . . . . Long before the arrival of Europeans on West Africa’s coast, the two continents shared a common acceptance of slavery as an unavoidable and necessary—perhaps even desirable—fact of existence. The commerce between the

> two continents, as tragic as it would become, developed upon familiar territory. Slavery was not a twisted European manipulation, although Europe capitalized on a mutual understanding and greedily expanded the slave trade into what would become a horrific enterprise . . . . It was a thunder that had no sound. Tribe stalked tribe, and eventually more than 20 million Africans would be kidnapped in their own homeland.

Historians estimate that ten million of these abducted Africans "never even made it to the slave ships. Most died on the march to the sea"—still chained, yoked, and shackled by their African captors—before they ever laid eyes on a white slave trader. The survivors were either purchased by European slave dealers or "instantly beheaded" by the African traders "in sight of the [slave ship] captain" if they could not be sold. Of course, the even more horrific and inhuman middle passage—the voyage of a European (and later American) slave ship from Africa to the Western Hemisphere—still lay before those who had survived the forced trek to the coast.

Failure to educate young Americans about the whole story of Atlantic slave trade threatens to divide our nation and undermine our civic unity and belief in the historical legitimacy of our democratic institutions. Education in a democracy cannot promote half-truths about history without undermining the ideal of e pluribus unum —one from many—and substituting a divisive emphasis on many from one. The history of the slave trade proves that virtually everyone participated and profited—whites and blacks; Christians, Muslims, and Jews; Europeans, Africans, Americans, and Latin Americans. Once we recognize the shared historical responsibility for the Atlantic slave trade, we can turn our attention to "transforming the future" by eradicating its corrosive legacy.

No one is well served when "old myths of African barbarism" are replaced by "new myths of African innocence." There are some encouraging signs. A recent middle school textbook, for example, tries to explain—

> how Africans could have sold other Africans into slavery. The answer is that [African] slaveholders didn't think of themselves or their slaves as 'Africans.' Instead they thought of themselves as Edo or Songhai or members of another group. They thought of their slaves as foreigners or inferiors. In the same way, the Spanish, the French, and the English could massacre each other in bloody wars because they thought of themselves as Spanish, French, or English, rather than Europeans.

Similar candor can also be found in a current college textbook co-authored by three African-American historians. Europeans and eventually Americans—

> did not capture and enslave people themselves. Instead they purchased slaves from African traders [who]…restricted the Europeans to a few points on the coast, while the kingdoms raided the interior to supply the Europeans with slaves. ... The European traders provided the aggressors with firearms, but they did not instigate the wars. Instead they used the wars to enrich themselves. Sometimes African armies enslaved the inhabitants of conquered towns and villages. At other times, raiding parties captured isolated families or kidnapped individuals. As warfare spread to the interior, captives had to march for hundreds of miles to the coast where European traders awaited them. The raiders tied the captives together with rope or secured them with wooden yokes around their necks. It was a shocking experience, and many captives died from hunger, exhaustion, and exposure during the journey. Others killed themselves rather than submit to their fate, and the captors killed those who resisted.

A concise version of this textbook prepared for a new required course on African-American history in Philadelphia high schools has retained all of this material—giving these students the opportunity to learn the full story of the Atlantic slave trade.

It is also encouraging that the AMISTAD America Sankofa College Program courses to be offered during the Amistad's visits to Sierra Leone and Senegal include study of the "West African slave trade" and "African slavery and the transatlantic slave trade"— presumably to be discussed candidly and accurately. Only by facing the whole truth can we free ourselves from the burden of our shared, tragic past and reinvigorate our commitment to what AMISTAD America rightly calls, "our collective history and future." As Martin Luther King, Jr. dared to dream at the 1963 March on Washington, we can then join hands and affirm together in the words of the African-American spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

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American Slavery in Historical Perspective

All countries tend to consider their history in isolation, assuming a form of national exceptionalism. That approach indeed captures the specificities of particular circumstances as well as the tendency to adopt distinctive national accounts to the past.

However, this approach is also misleading because meaning, let alone assessment, even judgment, are not free floating constructions but, rather, approaches that take on value in comparative contexts.

So it is with slavery and the slave trade. It is very easy to beat up on from the perspective of an individual state, but to do so can underplay the extent to which there is a comparative context. This is true both for Atlantic slavery and, indeed, for coercive labor as a whole. In the case of the latter, it may be all-too-easy to assume that slavery is a unique form that was/is readily defined. That assumption, however, is belied by the difficulties the League of Nations faced when it sought in 1926 to define slavery in order to act against it. In that case, differences over the extent to which both indentured labor and arranged marriages were forms of slavery immediately complicated the discussion. The League decided that neither was, but, far from that being obvious, it arose from the particular requirements of the imperial powers.

Therefore, far from presenting slavery as a unique form of coerced labor, it is more pertinent to see it as akin to, or, at least, part of a continuum with, other forms, such as serfdom, indentured labor, and convict work. All these were common across most of history, but tend to be downplayed in critical narratives due to the emphasis on slavery.

The same is true of two other elements that require consideration:

First the question, raised at the time, whether the nature of much work in the nineteenth century, for example in mill towns where workers were paid with tokens, was a form of slavery.

Second, comes the very different understanding of slavery, that of public slavery in which the very operation of the political and governmental system eliminates, or at least substantially constrains, the freedom and liberty of citizens. From that perspective, North Koreans today are slaves, as are all of those controlled by authoritarian societies.

These elements raise significant questions about the essential narrative of American slavery, and the attempt to offer any sense of distinctiveness. Moreover, broader social and economic trends take on significance. Thus, as far as the nineteenth-century erosion of slavery was concerned, a key element was that of large-scale urbanization and the corresponding move of people from the relative control of hierarchical rural society to the more fluid urban society. This arguably was more significant to living circumstances and conditions than any change in legislative provisions. The latter indeed could possibly lead only to the exchange of the former control of slavery by a more informal control by social, economic, and political circumstances—as, to a considerable extent, happened in the American South until the mid-twentieth century.

Capitalism could act as a basic driver behind a more profound transition, as demonstrated by the “Great Migration” of African-Americans to northern and midwestern industrial cities during the two world wars. That move reflected a lack of control over labor as existed in authoritarian systems such as the Soviet Union, plus the opportunities created by economic activity. These led to a fresh process

in the definition of Civil Rights for African-Americans. Differing forms of freedom/subjection were at stake because emancipation in 1865 had not settled the issue.

Similar developments marked other slave societies, notably in the two most important in the Americas, Brazil and Cuba. In each case, the formal state of slaves was intertwined with economic, social, and political developments. The most important contrast was between the United States and Cuba on the one hand and Brazil on the other. In the former case, conflict was important to emancipation, but in Brazil, slavery was ended without conflict. Instead, social, economic and political changes proved more important, notably the end of monarchy with the consequent alteration in political power, and the relative decline of the slave-sugar society of the northeast and the rise of southern provinces in which free labor was important. This change was linked to changing images in Brazilian society. Brazilians increasingly understood progress as making Brazil a European-type society, with freedom for workers requiring a rejection of the older forms of socio-ethnic distinction and control.

That the United States did not go in the same direction as Brazil was not inevitable. In terms of political structure, the United States was closer to Brazil than to Cuba, which was the colony of a European power, Spain. Both the United States and Brazil were federal systems. Brazil proved more successful, ending both slavery and imperial monarchy without a civil war, whereas the United States had its most traumatic conflict, more so, indeed, than those of the two world wars.

If the American Civil War (1861-5) was the product and proof of failure to resolve the slavery issue peacefully, then the why question becomes more significant. What about American society and politics made it impossible to dispense with slavery short of a war; leaving aside completely for a moment the continued subordinate situation of Freedmen after 1865 and, more particularly, after the end of Reconstruction in 1877.

That question invites us to address specificities and to move aside from broader cultural and social patterns of racist discrimination and ethnic control, since, as noted, the latter did not determine a given outcome. To use a very different case, the slave work of Jews in labor camps in the 1940s was genocidal in the German case and not the Soviet one, which reflected the specifics of the ideological warfare of these two oppressive states rather than the commonality of authoritarianism. A similar contrast can be seen in slavery in Cambodia and North Korea in the late 1970s.

Control over people is a common element, but its nature varied and varies. In the case of the American South, this control was identified with a white identity focused on states' rights. Although many who fought for the South did not own slaves, the states' rights they sought to defend were defined in part in terms of the defense of slavery. In this, self-interest, regional identity, a sense of imperiled masculinity and religious conviction all played a role. Indeed, Richard, Second Lord Lyons, the British envoy, noted in December 1859: "The orthodox notion seems to be that slavery is a divine institution."

In the decades before the Civil War, Southern advocates of slavery, such as future President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis, saw it as a way to guarantee a labor force in the West that would bring prosperity, by making irrigated agriculture feasible, and thus overcoming the constraints of geography, as well as providing the security of continuous white-dominated settlement, thus lessening the power of the Native Americans. Slavery also played a role in Southern interest in the United States gaining Cuba from Spain.

More than one factor was involved in emancipation, and this should remind us to be wary of single interpretations in history. That Cuba remained a slave society until Spain abolished it in 1886 reflected the range of circumstances. There was Black "agency" in Cuba in the shape of the Ten Years War of 1868-78. This saw partial abolition in rebel areas, encouraging the move for gradual

abolition in the island as a whole. Yet, the independence struggle that led to this partial abolition failed, and Spain regained control. The key decision arose from the Liberal governments that dominated Spain from 1874. One also should not discount the political momentum that developed in the late 19 th century. Thus, Portugal, the colonial power in Angola, Mozambique, Portuguese Guinea, the Cape Verde Islands, Madeira, and the Azores, embraced emancipation in 1861, followed, in 1863, by the Dutch, who still had a large plantation economy in Surinam, as well as islands in the Caribbean, and a developing empire in the East Indies.

The range of states that abolished slavery is a reminder of the range of states that had taken part in it. At the same time, however, this was only a portion of the slave world. Indeed, the tendency, in Western public debate, to focus on the trajectory of Atlantic slavery leads to a serious misunderstanding of its prevalence. Slavery had far deeper roots than the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which only began from the early sixteenth century. Leaving aside the situation elsewhere, for example slavery in China, Japan, Korea, pre-Columbian America, and New Zealand, all of which saw slavery, this was the case in Africa, Europe, and the Islamic world. The prevalence of slavery in these cultures, and, in contrast, the relatively brief period subsequent to this, underlines the centrality of slavery in world history. Slavery provided labor and was also used as punishment and debt-exchange. Christian Europe became less of a slave society in the medieval period, but slavery certainly continued, as did serfdom, a system of forced labor based on hereditary bondage to the land, but with a contractualism that was not present for slavery.

In the Islamic world, slavery even more important. In large part, this reflected the extent to which slave armies were used as slaves in government. The extensive sexual economy made possible by polygamy also increased the need for slaves. Only non-Muslims could be enslaved, although slaves who converted to Islam kept their servile status. The demands of the Islamic world for slaves were the basic driver in the pre-Columbian international slave trade and continued to be significant into the twentieth century. Scholars are well aware of this, but public attention to this phenomenon, both in the West and in the non-West, is minimal. Africa had long provided slaves for Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies, but this process received renewed emphasis under the expanding Islamic states. Arab slave traders benefited from the expansion of Islam south of the Sahara, which encouraged the development of trans-Saharan trade routes along which slaves were moved. Warfare in sub-Saharan Africa was a major source of these states.

The responsibility of sub-Saharan Africans as opposed to outside elements for slavery remains a matter of intense debate. Economic opportunity encouraged slavery, but so did warfare. The relative weakness of European influence in the region until well into the 19 th century meant that they could not command a supply of slaves, although that element tends to be underplayed today. An appreciation of the context complicates ideas of reparations or apologies. The idea is inherently problematic because of the notion of hereditary guilt, which modern societies tend to reject. There is also the naivety of sorting out victims and villains over that period of time. Should the Africans who sold other Africans pay compensation? What is the position of people of “mixed race?” Even the notion of generalized African victimhood is problematic, given the strength of some of the African states that sold slaves, for example Dahomey in the eighteenth century. The complications are myriad.

The mechanics of the slave trade are themselves instructive, as seen through the example of largest market in the eighteenth century, Brazil. Plantation goods exported from Brazil—sugar, tobacco, coffee, and cotton—ensured that there were over one million slaves there by 1800. This economy was shaped by a crucial partnership between Europeans and élite Africans, with Luso-African families, who spanned the Portuguese world of the Angolan coast and the African world of the interior, also having links into the plantation-owning families of north-east Brazil.

Alongside slaves from Africa, mostly Angola, there was slave raiding at the expense of the indigenous population. Indeed, in addressing the issue of compensation, it is unclear how far the claims of Native Americans should also be considered, and notably in Brazil and the United States. That is yet another issue that has so far received insufficient attention.

Ultimately, politics drives the public discussion, and ongoing culture wars encourage ahistoricism. The contrast between demands for compensation directed against the West, principally the United States and Britain, and the far less attention devoted to the same against non-Western countries is striking. Moreover, there is an unwillingness to confront the current state of slavery. Bitter and frequent warfare in southern and western Sudan from the 1960s to the 2010s, for example, has led, and still leads, to the enslavement of captured men and women. Across Africa, rebel groups have captured and capture women for sex slaves. In 2014, Abubakar Shekau, the head of the Nigerian Islamic militant group Boko Haram, announced in a video: “I abducted your girls. I will sell them in the market by Allah. There is a market for selling humans. Allah says I should sell. He commands me to sell. I will sell women. I sell women.” The movement also kidnapped men and children for enforced service, including as soldiers. In Iraq, the Islamic State followed both processes, and on a large scale.

To understand all is not to pardon all, but broader understanding of a moral abomination as profound as slavery should help shape better public policy. Encouraging societies to confront the historical significance of slavery is in itself a laudable goal, but the preference of some commentators for attacking past Western misdeeds rather than confronting large-scale trafficking and slavery today, distorts both our understanding of the past and also our current responsibilities. Moral condemnation of past misdeeds is important if societies are to grow and develop, but should not distract us from the challenge of trying to produce a more livable future.

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Slavery Persists Today

No one speaks in favour of modern slavery, and slavery has no real friends. At best, it can be said that slavery has temporary acquaintances, people who rely on slavery for short term profit.

No country or business can build its future on slavery. Indeed, slavery thwarts economic empowerment and puts a ceiling on growth.

All sides of politics are unified behind this point, a rarity in today's fractured policy landscape. Likewise, business has led its own reform and has shown its willingness to work with government in joint endeavours. The leaders of all faiths have come together and shared their common abhorrence of slavery in their teachings.

Still, despite this leadership many continue to benefit from this often invisible crime, or resign themselves to accepting modern slavery as an inevitability.

Modern slavery is a human condition of our own making which can be ended by concerted action. It is a multi-billion dollar transnational criminal business which, on any one given day in 2016, ensnared 40.3 million people.

The scale of this truly global and abhorrent practice is staggering and will not be rectified until there is significant cooperation between business and government. One of the first areas to address is rooting out slavery where it exists in supply chains, be they of major businesses or governments.

Many governments are the biggest buyers of goods and services in their countries. Public procurement represents, on average, around 12 percent of a country's GDP and it is estimated to be in the order of the GDP which equals to US$1.6 trillion worldwide.

While some governments are setting reporting requirements for corporations, there are a paucity of measures directed at minimising the risks of modern slavery in public procurement in these policy responses. Governments need to get their houses in order.

This is a failure of leadership and an insult to business, which is tasked with meeting high expectations by policy makers who fail to measure themselves to the same standards. Continued inaction by governments exposes them to enormous reputational risk and economic consequences.

Thankfully, there are green shoots of progress. This year's Global Slavery Index finds 36 countries are taking steps to investigate forced labour in business or public supply chains, up from just four countries in 2016. Of the 36 countries, 25 are taking steps on government procurement. And there is no reason why the figure can't be higher.

The countries which collaborate beyond their own borders to adopt regional approaches to stamp out slavery will be rewarded with stronger societies, robust trade, and sustainable growth. Those that take steps to clean up labour issues at home will send the best possible signals to the investment world.

For investment destinations that are both accountable and attractive, there is almost no shortage of capital available. As more is learned about slavery, and how to measure it, investors will increasingly steer clear of opportunities that come with exposure to slavery risk. Business leaders are

acutely aware of the attractiveness of certain investment destinations and often labour issues and other social problems are serious deterrents to new ventures.

In the short term, slavery may fill criminals' pockets with illegal profits, but in the long-term, the national profits of a country that allows slavery to thrive will be dragged down. Economic empowerment is the key to long term growth and so it is no surprise that slavery, more than many other factors, cruels sustainable development.

As scrutiny increases down the long tail of multi-national companies' supply chains, countries that continue to allow modern slavery within their borders are at ever increasing risk of tarnishing their reputation and losing out on trade.

But slavery is not just a problem for developing countries seeking investment.

The great challenge with modern slavery is that not only is it hidden within the depths of criminal networks that are trafficking people for exploitation, but modern slavery also occurs where mainstream industries meet informal economies.

Slavery exists in all corners of the planet and touches us all through trade and consumer choices.

Businesses and governments in G20 countries are importing masses of products that come with significant risks of being produced using modern slavery.

By providing decent work or demanding their suppliers and contractors do, companies are investing in the futures of communities. Profits and purpose are not mutually exclusive. In the long term, everyone loses out from slavery.

We have a tremendous opportunity to capitalise on the progress made and the commitment of so many to end the misery of 40.3 million of our fellow human beings.

It is an opportunity we must not let slip.

Source: https://www.globalslaveryindex.org/resources/essays/public-procurement-the-trillion-dollar-missing-link