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## Combating the Slave Trade: Why Governments are not Good at Governing

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## Combating the Slave Trade: Why Governments are not Good at Governing

### Abstract

It is difficult to read Benjamin Skinner's revealing piece on the international slave trade and not feel revolted that we still live in a world where so many people live in bondage. What is particularly disturbing is that much of the modern-day slave trade takes place with the full knowledge, and even acquiescence of, state governments.

### Keywords

Human rights, Slavery, Human trafficking, Enforcement

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## **Combating the Slave Trade: Why Governments are not Good at Governing**

by Eric A. Heinze

It is difficult to read Benjamin Skinner's revealing piece on the international slave trade and not feel revolted that we still live in a world where so many people live in bondage. What is particularly disturbing is that much of the modern-day slave trade takes place with the full knowledge, and even acquiescence of, state governments. It is true that governments like the U.S. and the [Netherlands](#) have taken important steps in passing laws that outlaw human trafficking. But like so many of the challenges that confront the international human rights movement today, as well as a host of other international issue-areas, the problem is not a shortage of laws that outlaw or otherwise criminalize such activity. Slavery, the slave-trade, and other forms of human trafficking are outlawed in the domestic legal systems of almost all states, and there are numerous international instruments that likewise outlaw and criminalize such activity. The problem, rather, is that in those states where such problems are particularly pronounced, there is little or no interest in implementing or enforcing these laws.

Almost by their very nature, governments of states are particularly bad at being advocates of specific causes and working toward solving problems in narrow issue areas—whether slavery, environmental degradation, women's rights, etc. The reason is simple. Unlike non-governmental organizations (NGOs), states governments do not have the luxury of preoccupying themselves with one particular issue or problem and dedicating all their resources to addressing it. It is almost a truism to say that governments will always have competing political imperatives. To be sure, governments do maintain various offices in their foreign ministries specifically intended to combat particular problems, such as the U.S. State Department's [Office to Combat Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons](#). But as Skinner's article suggests, at the end of the day the efforts of individuals working in these offices will end up as bullet-points in a policy hierarchy that will probably take a back seat to some supposedly more important concern. The author's example of [Condoleezza Rice's refusal](#) to scold India for its tolerance of human trafficking is no doubt a result of exactly such a process.

NGOs, on the other hand, do not share this dilemma. They do not have to be concerned with securing access to resources, procuring trade agreements, placating constituencies, and defending the homeland. It is therefore not especially surprising that the various grassroots organizations that Skinner mentions, and *not* state governments, have been at the forefront of the fight against the modern-day slave trade. Furthermore, unlike governments, which have to prioritize issues and “multitask,” NGOs specialize and can focus on “depth” instead of “breadth.” Unfortunately, aside from knowledge and specialization, the material resources needed to be truly effective in such endeavors lie almost exclusively with states—hence Skinner's call for government partnerships with such organizations.

But such a call is indicative of a broader revelation in global efforts to regulate certain international activity. That is, paradoxically, governments are not very good at governing—at least globally. One need only examine the foreign policy-making process of the U.S., or the process by which international agreements are concluded among states to reach this conclusion. Duly designated representatives of states, in all their grandeur and formality, gather at U.N.

headquarters in New York, extol the virtues of the non-binding declaration they are about to pass, cast a vote (sometimes), and then pat themselves on the back for taking such an important step toward eradicating some repugnant global practice, many of whom know full well that their government is complicit in such a practice.

Perhaps instead of the various offices in the U.S. State Department relying on the Secretary of State to be the tip of the spear in this fight, these offices should coordinate with their counterparts in other states, as well as the various grassroots organizations working in this area, and allow people with specialized knowledge and who are dedicated to solving this problem have a stab at it. As Parag Khanna argued in the article the [HRHW Roundtable discussed last month](#), perhaps it is time for international relations to go beyond what takes place in foreign ministries, embassies, and sluggish, overly-formal diplomatic fora. This is already happening to a certain degree (among law enforcement agencies, for example), but unless it starts happening in the human rights arena, we can expect to read a lot more of these depressing articles in years to come.

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