2010 William Wilberforce Award Winner

Roger Plant | United Kingdom

You can think of Roger Plant as history's most unusual census taker. As head of a UN agency task force, he set out to count the number of slaves in the world today. The premise: you can't cure it if you can't count it. His global estimates of slavery—and of the profits made by slaveholders—have helped forge a worldwide governmental response.

"There's a tremendous amount of good will around in the world," Roger says. "Our job is to mobilize the good will against the bad."

William Wilberforce Award is given to an individual who has moved a major institution, government, business or large groups of people to significant action to fight slavery. Named after the politician who successfully fought for three decades to abolish slavery in the British Empire.

Roger congratulates Vice-Speaker of the Georgian Parliament Rusudan Kervalishvili on her country's work to combat slavery.

Sina was tortured in this now-aban "I was kept in chains. That was the most fearful part for me. Our freedom is our revenge."—Tario, Slavery Survivor doned dungeon.

A Moral Responsibility

Roger is a restless man who relishes a daunting challenge. He was a child math whiz, and he learned other qualities in British boarding school that would help him focus his energy for good.

"The Jesuits were a very important motivating force in my life," Roger says. "The Jesuits are rigorous. The Jesuits are disciplined. But the Jesuits, I think, are also impatient. I was brought up and taught early in life to want to give everything I've got to achieve social justice."

Fresh from Oxford University with a degree in international development, Roger was on the front lines of activism in Latin America. He researched death squads in Guatemala and a coup in Chile. He counted the number of political prisoners in Cuba. He encountered slavery in the sugar plantations of the Dominican Republic. Talking with slaves and survivors touched his heart.

"The important thing is not to underestimate the pain, the pain can be absolutely terrible," Roger says. "But always recognize that this is somebody who's now got a chance to be fully liberated as a full human being again. I'm there to listen, to learn, to see if I can be of any help."

Roger is not satisfied with studying a problem. He considers it his moral responsibility to solve it.

Thinking Globally

Roger headed to Geneva, Switzerland in 2002 to create a "special action program" at the International Labor Organization (ILO), an agency of the United Nations. His goal at the ILO was to combat situations worldwide where people are forced to work against their will. The first challenge was to convince politicians, diplomats, business leaders and labor unions that slavery truly is a global problem.

“We’ve got to persuade public opinion,” Roger says, “and this is the importance of that headcount.”

His researchers went country by country, adapting statistical methods used to estimate hard-to-count endangered wildlife populations. The team determined there are at least 12 million people forced to work against their will in the world today, generating nearly $32 billion in illicit profits for traffickers.

The team was quick to say their figures were a minimum estimate, noting that they had uncovered just the “tip of a disturbing iceberg.”

“In fact,” Roger notes of his estimate, the actual number of slaves could be “two or three times as big.”

Free the Slaves estimates there are 27 million slaves in the world today.

Roger’s reports came with the full force of the United Nations behind them. They are regarded as breakthroughs that helped propel governments and international institutions to take action. They created global benchmarks for measuring progress.

“I think probably the most important thing about this global estimate is not the aggregate number in itself,” Roger says. “It’s the light it shed on the forms of slavery-like practice in the world today.

“The more I got into it, the more I realized that this is not just small backward agriculture in the south Asian countries,” Roger says. “You can find slavery today affecting children, women and also men in major construction companies, in electronics, in automobiles, in shipbuilding, in the richest industrialized countries. I can tell you there is no country which is immune from this terrible problem today.”

Roger’s team at the ILO went on to study global migration and economic patterns that allow slave traffickers to prey on the disadvantaged. He has bucked the slow-and-soft approach that typifies international agencies, to build bridges among those who have the resources to make change.

“Business has got to get together with governments, with trade unions, to tackle loopholes in legislation which is allowing modern slavery to proliferate around the globe,” Roger says.

The Fight Has Just Begun

Roger recently retired from the ILO, but he hasn’t stopped fighting. He works as an independent consultant for governments and international development banks. One of his major focuses these days are labor recruiting agents, because many firms are mere fronts for slave trafficking.

“We’ve got to be really on red alert at a time of international global financial crisis,” he says. “People are always looking for loopholes in order to make unfair profits at the expense of the vulnerable. And this is very, very dangerous in today’s global economy.”

How long can Roger carry on?

“As long as I’ve got energy,” he insists, “as long as I can keep moving.”