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The Quandary of Economic Sanctions

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POINT/COUNTERPOINT

Economic Sanctions and Human Rights: A Delicate Balance

by Michael P. Malloy

The once and future radical Angela Davis was recently quoted in the *New York Times* criticizing U.S. economic sanctions against Cuba on the grounds that they only make a bad economic situation worse. While one may wonder whether this observation was intended by Ms. Davis to illustrate that economic sanctions are ineffective, or too effective, her remark implicitly raises a serious concern for those who make and those who study economic sanctions policy:

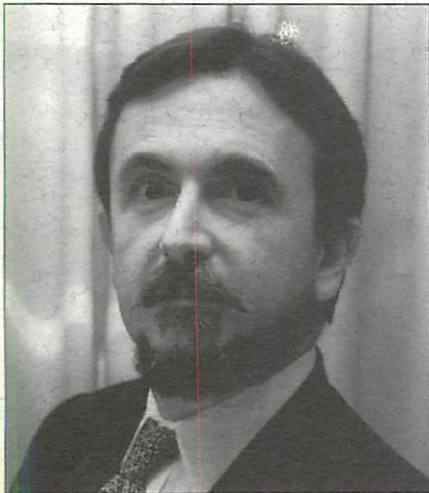


Photo courtesy of Michael Malloy

Michael Malloy

What is the proper balance between the deployment of economic sanctions and the effects, possibly unintended, on human rights concerns?

The interplay between human rights and economic sanctions is fraught with tension. The United States is the most frequent user of international economic sanctions in the world. U.S. sanctions programs often involve broad prohibitions against trade and finan-

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Economic sanctions as a means of achieving political change have become commonplace amongst the world community. Often, the objective espoused by the nation or group of nations seeking their use has been the enforcement of human rights. Countries like Cuba, Iraq, South Africa, and Haiti, historically inimical to human rights protection, have all been the focus of such initiatives. Though generally well-intentioned, many of these efforts caused serious humanitarian consequences to the populations of the target countries.

Whether economic sanctions are an effective tool for advancing individual liberty and human dignity is a question that transcends the political perspective of human rights and reaches the realm of ethics and morality. It challenges the basic sense of right and wrong and further questions whether the creation of an environment of deprivation and economic need among the general populace, at least on a temporary basis, justifies the greater goal of advancing human rights.

David Cortright is President of the Fourth Freedom Foundation, a privately-operated foundation which advocates the abolition of nuclear weapons and the use of economic sanctions and incentives as alternatives to military violence. The Forum is currently co-sponsoring a "Sanctions and Humanitarianism" project to examine the interrelated issues of humanitarian impact and sanctions effectiveness. Mr. Cortright is also a visiting fellow at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame and assistant professor in the Peace Studies department at Goshen College. From 1977 to 1987, he served as executive director of SANE, the largest peace organization in the United States.

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cial transactions between persons subject to U.S. jurisdiction and particular target states or their nationals. When implemented effectively, such programs can have a dramatic impact on the basic human rights of subsistence and security. This presents the question whether policy makers should adjust sanctions programs to ameliorate such possible effects.

In recent years, economic sanctions have even been mobilized specifically — or at least ostensibly — in an effort to vindicate human rights. The case of Southern Rhodesia/Zimbabwe in the 1960s and 1970s provides one such example, while the case of South Africa is a more recent one. Other situations, like Haiti and the former Yugoslavia, arguably represent situations in which at least one major objective of the sanctions is the vindication of human rights. Much the same may be said for U.S. sanctions against Cuba. These

cases raise the question of whether sanctions can be considered effective in vindicating human rights when they inflict considerable harm on those they ostensibly seek to benefit.

Sanctions imposed in the past, such as those imposed during WWII, the trade and financial sanctions against China, the Iran hostage sanctions, and the ongoing Iraqi sanctions, have been very effective means of achieving well-defined foreign policy objectives. Whether imposed for such broad policy reasons or in response to specific human rights concerns, sanctions usually, and perhaps inevitably, involve an immediate human cost within the target state. Short of abandoning sanctions as foreign policy tools, however, there is probably no practical way to ensure that sanctions *both* narrowly affect only the targeted state actors *and* still remain effective.

continued on page 14