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Humanitarian Sanctions? The Moral and Political Issues

by David Cortright

Multilateral economic sanctions offer the prospect of a more civilized world where international norms are enforced not through military violence but through the power of trade. Sanctions can be an effective tool against military aggression, weapons proliferation, and gross violations of human rights. Since the end of the cold war, the UN Security Council has imposed multilateral sanctions with unprecedented frequency. South Africa, Iraq, former Yugoslavia, and Haiti are four recent cases where comprehensive trade sanctions were imposed. Despite the increasing use of

that sanctions cause excessive economic hardship and suffering among vulnerable populations while having little effect on those in power. Conventional

Conventional theory holds that the effectiveness of sanctions is directly proportional to the level of pain they impose on a target nation. Others contend that sanctions are questionable ethically because they impose disproportionate harm on innocent civilians.

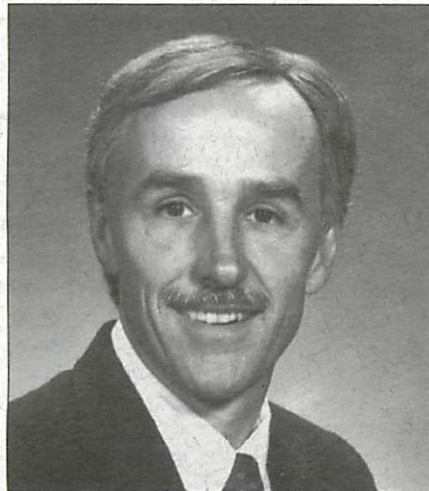


Photo courtesy of David Cortright

David Cortright

sanctions, however, much uncertainty remains regarding their political effectiveness.

The most serious questions regarding the use of sanctions concern their humanitarian impact. Many believe

theory holds that the effectiveness of sanctions is directly proportional to the level of pain they impose on a target nation. Some analysts take issue with this view, arguing that there is no necessary causal relationship between the amount of hardship caused by sanctions and the degree of political change adopted by a target nation. Others contend that sanctions are questionable ethically because they impose disproportionate harm on innocent civilians. UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, in his *Supplement to an Agenda for Peace* report, questioned "whether suffering inflicted on vulnerable groups in the target country is a legitimate means of exerting pressure on political leaders."

The issues of humanitarian impact and effectiveness of sanctions are directly interconnected. When economic measures are imposed, the

result in the target country can be either a "rally-around-the-flag" effect or an "internal opposition" effect. In the former, the leadership uses external pressures to invoke patriotic and nationalist forces in support of government policies, a pattern apparent in Iraq and Serbia. In the latter, sanctions empower domestic opposition groups and isolate the political elites responsible for wrongdoing. This effect was substantially evident in the case of South Africa, and to a more limited degree, in Haiti. Obviously, the goal of

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nations implementing economic sanctions should be to create an internal opposition effect rather than a rally effect. This will depend on the ethical and humanitarian consequences of the sanctions regime.

Much thought has been devoted recently to the ethical criteria for imposing sanctions. Some argue that although sanctions imposing hardship on a target nation may be appropriate, they should not drive living standards of the general population below subsistence levels. A sanctions regime that goes beyond this standard loses politi-

Too often, sanctions are a prelude to war rather than an alternative.

cal and moral legitimacy. Arguing from a just war perspective, others make the related point that sanctions should never deprive a civilian population of the basic human right to life and survival. Moreover, the international community has a responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance and alleviate

Point/Counterpoint is a regular feature of *The Human Rights Brief*. The purpose of the section is to encourage meaningful, intellectual discussion on contemporary issues in human rights and humanitarian law through the presentation of two diverse, though not necessarily opposing, opinions on the subject at hand. Commentaries for the Point/Counterpoint section are generally solicited by *The Brief*; however, the Editorial Board welcomes all submissions, comments, and suggestions. The newsletter does not facilitate the exchange of the authors' compositions prior to publication. The views expressed in the Point/Counterpoint section are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of *The Human Rights Brief*, the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, or their Directors or staff.

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the suffering of the most vulnerable victims of sanctions. Pacifists argue that nations imposing economic sanctions have an affirmative obligation to pro-

The international community has a responsibility to provide humanitarian assistance and alleviate the suffering of the most vulnerable victims of sanctions.

vide humanitarian aid and protect the lives of vulnerable populations in a target nation. This raises the related issue of sanctions as an alternative to war. Too often, sanctions are a prelude to war rather than an alternative. To be morally acceptable, sanctions must stand in sharp distinction to the use of military violence.

A crucial standard for determining the moral and political legitimacy of a sanctions policy is the degree to which sanctions are supported within the target nation by democratic and human rights groups. The American Friends Service Committee focused on this criterion in their 1993 report, *Dollars or Bombs: The Search for Justice Through International Economic Sanctions*. When sanctions are supported by human rights advocates and victims of oppression, the moral legitimacy of the sanc-

In the case of South Africa, sanctions were morally legitimate and politically effective precisely because they were supported by the majority African population represented by the African National Congress.

tions regime is enhanced. Political effectiveness is likely to be greater as well. In the case of South Africa, sanctions were morally legitimate and politically effective precisely because they were supported by the majority African population represented by the African National Congress. In nations such as Iraq, where repression has eliminated domestic democratic opposition, applying the standard of internal support is much more difficult. Even here, howev-

er, the voice of opposition groups in exile can be consulted. The Iraqi National Congress, based in Iraqi Kurdistan and London, continues to support UN sanctions as indispensable to resistance efforts against the regime of Saddam Hussein.

There are no easy solutions to the sanctions dilemma. Each particular case must be judged on its own merits, or lack thereof. The following observations may serve as guidelines for assessing the moral and political appropriateness of a sanctions policy:

- Sanctions should be applied only in a multilateral fashion, with the support and authorization of the UN Secu-

Humanitarian assistance for vulnerable populations must be a major element of sanctions policy.

ity Council. Unilateral measures, such as the U.S. embargo against Cuba, are politically ineffective, morally questionable, and without foundation in international law.

- Humanitarian assistance for vulnerable populations must be a major element of sanctions policy. The Security Council grants humanitarian exemptions in its sanctions regimes, but current procedures are woefully inadequate in addressing the nutritional, medical, and other needs of vulnerable populations in nations targeted for sanctions. As the American Friends Service Committee report argues, nations imposing sanctions have an "affirmative obligation" to ensure that humanitarian assistance is actually delivered.

- The targeting of sanctions holds considerable promise as a means for applying pressure on political and military elites. The use of financial sanctions, including the freezing of overseas financial assets, may be especially effective in this regard. Other measures might include selectively canceling development projects, revoking

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passports and visas, and banning air transport.

- Sanctions should be combined with offers of incentives and an ongoing process of dialogue and negotiation. While sanctions may close off avenues of trade, they should not block discussion and communication.

Sanctions cannot be effective politically if they are unacceptable morally.

Indeed, sanctions work best when they are part of a "carrots and sticks" policy designed to bring the dispute to the bargaining table for resolution.

Is it possible to impose economic sanctions effectively while providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations? Many would say no, but my own view is that these two objectives can and must be addressed simultaneously. Sanctions cannot be effective politically if they are unacceptable morally. Economic pressures should be targeted against decision makers, not the innocent, and special care

Economic pressures should be targeted against decision makers, not the innocent, and special care should be taken to meet the humanitarian needs of vulnerable populations.

should be taken to meet the humanitarian needs of vulnerable populations. When affirmed by human rights advocates within the target nation, such an approach can lead to a sanctions policy that is both effective and humanitarian. ☉

