Sanctions are often seen as an attractive alternative to warfare. But are sanctions truly non-violent? U.S. policymakers use sanctions to inflict pain on individuals or countries they judge to be behaving badly. Few would say we want sanctions to hurt ordinary people in the countries where they are imposed.

In truth, however, those most harmed by sanctions are not political leaders, but those most vulnerable. Decades of restrictive sanctions have crippled economies and contributed to unnecessary deaths.

People of faith have a responsibility to work for reconciliation (Matthew 5:24, 2 Corinthians 5:19), to refuse to see the people of any country as our enemies (Matthew 5:43–48), and to name the harmful policies of governments—including our own (1 Kings 21, Esther 7).

For more than 100 years, MCC has provided humanitarian relief, promoted sustainable livelihoods and invested in peacebuilding in complex locations, including in countries sanctioned by the U.S government.

Read on to learn more about the history of sanctions, the impacts, and what policy changes are needed.
**What are sanctions?**

Sanctions are penalties that countries and groups of countries impose with the aim of inflicting enough pain to force change. Sanctions can be placed against **individuals** (such as foreign officials accused of corruption), **organizations** (such as terrorist groups), **sectors** (such as an arms embargo, which prohibits the sale of weapons), or against **entire nations**, blocking most trade with a country.

In 2023, 54 countries globally are impacted by sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union, or the United Nations, according to a recent report from the Center for Economic and Political Research. Sanctions are often viewed as a nonviolent action; however, not unlike a military siege, the purpose of sanctions is to cut off essential supplies in order to force political leaders to give in to demands.

**Sanctions have long history in U.S. foreign policy**

In 1918 at the height of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson stated that, “A nation that is boycotted is a nation in sight of surrender.” Wilson believed that the practice of singling out countries deemed adversarial to U.S. national interests by economically isolating them was a “... peaceful, silent deadly remedy, and there will be no need for force.” As a chief architect of the League of Nations, Wilson helped to codify international sanctions policy in the League’s charter, which has similarities to UN sanctions policies today.

President Truman, in 1950, formalized sanctions policy under the U.S. Department of the Treasury and enacted a complete trade embargo of North Korea in response to the outbreak of the Korean War. While sanctions, embargoes and boycotts were used prior to this, it was the post-WWII environment and, in particular, the Korean War, that solidified this U.S. foreign policy tool.

As the global economy became even more interconnected in the post-Cold war era, sanctions became a tool to economically starve groups the U.S. deemed an enemy or a threat. During the Gulf War in 1991, sanctions on Iraq led to significant shortages of medical supplies and daily necessities for ordinary people.

It was in the post-9/11 context, however, that the use of sanctions by U.S. administrations grew significantly. U.S. sanctions impacted five countries at the beginning of 2001, increasing to 21 countries by 2021—including more than 8,000 additional individuals and organizations.

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**Are sanctions effective?**

In theory, sanctions work by inflicting pain that pressures nations, organizations or individuals to change their negative behavior. For example, U.S. sanctions against another country may prevent trade with entire industries or sectors—in extreme cases, by banning all commercial imports, exports and information exchange with the country.

Does this isolation and economic hardship lead to policy change? The answer is unclear. In part, because the U.S. government does not measure the policy impacts of sanctions in a systematic way, nor does it measure the broad impacts of sanctions on the well-being of those living in sanctioned countries.

U.S. policymakers regularly use the language of human rights as a basis for employing sanctions, but the reality is that sanctions are often used to contain enemies and retain U.S. dominance.
Are sanctions nonviolent?

Decades of strict U.S. sanctions have isolated countries like Cuba, the People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK, or, North Korea) and Iran. While wealthy elites find ways to evade sanctions, it is ordinary people who suffer from severely weakened economies and isolation from the rest of the world.

For those living in areas threatened by conflict or authoritarian rule, sanctions can be the difference between life and death, restricting access to food and medical supplies, and infrastructure materials for hospitals, schools and roads.

Humanitarian organizations are also subject to sanctions. Sending basic items such as water filters or hygiene kits can require complicated, time-intensive exemptions from the U.S. government and the UN, limiting the amount of relief work that can be done.

Policy solutions

Sanctions should be a last resort and never a first response. Isolation, more often than not, causes enormous hardship for ordinary people. Instead, U.S. policymakers should prioritize diplomacy and locally-led peacebuilding programs.

When sanctions are used, they should be narrow, targeted, and have appropriate humanitarian exemptions. Exemptions should be broad enough to cover the activities and necessary services that humanitarian organizations rely on to do their work.

In limited cases, sanctions against individual human rights violators can reduce their legitimacy and power. Care should be taken, however, to consider how even narrow sanctions might affect opportunities for diplomacy or have broader effects as political power shifts.

The potential impacts on vulnerable groups should always be considered when weighing whether and how to impose sanctions and the humanitarian and policy impacts of economic sanctions should be systematically measured.

Lastly, recognizing that sanctions can have unintended economic impacts on non-sanctioned countries, the U.S. should work in broad coalitions of countries when imposing sanctions, rather than acting alone.

In significant ways, sanctions fail at their stated goals. Sanctions often detract from diplomacy and harm those most vulnerable. Additionally, sanctions have limited the ability for humanitarian organizations such as MCC to supply needed food and medicine, to help communities rebuild after violent conflict, and to be peacemakers and bridge-builders for a better future.

Cuba: A case study on sanctions

by Galen Fitzkee

After 61 years of an embargo preventing trade between the U.S. and Cuba, one might hope for evidence that U.S. sanctions improved the lives of ordinary Cubans. In reality, however, the sanctions have failed to achieve even their stated U.S. foreign policy goals, while at the same time exacerbating poverty in Cuba.

In 1962, just prior to the Cuban Missile Crisis, President John F. Kennedy introduced sanctions on Cuba in response to the Cuban revolution and the country’s relationship with the Soviet Union. The embargo prohibited all trade with Cuba, and eventually expanded to ban the import of any product containing Cuban goods.

Despite these continued measures, the political regime in Cuba remains intact. The very broad restrictions severely limit the Cuban government’s options for economic activity, contributing to widespread poverty. Counter-intuitively, sanctions can also provide country leadership with a convenient excuse for problems that are under their control.

For ordinary Cubans, the economic conditions are dire. Basic goods like toothpaste, meat, and medical supplies are difficult to find in stores, as are supplies for would-be farmers and those interested in opening a small business.

MCC has increased material support to Cuba, sending multiple shipping containers in 2023, including canned meat and basic hygiene supplies, to Brethren in Christ churches in the region.

Fortunately, MCC has been able to navigate the U.S. sanctions restrictions on shipments of humanitarian aid, but other faith-based groups continue to have difficulty sending important items such as medical syringes to their partners in Cuba.

Aside from providing material support, one way individuals can support our neighbors in Cuba is by calling on the U.S. government to end the embargo (npjm.mcc.org). Real change will only happen when we recognize the failure of sanctions in this context and begin to view Cuba as a neighbor to dialogue with, rather than an adversary to harm.
Poem for reflection

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, is it true that states that see National Security as the supreme value are like Nebuchadnezzar with his golden statue that the king commanded to be adored? Adoration today consists in the idea that, in defense of the supreme value, everything is permissible: kidnappings, tortures, disappearances, murders. Everything is permissible to safeguard National Security. Is this when one must be willing to be cast into the fiery furnace? Clearly, the Spirit of God inspires a new song that will encourage the victims of the idolatries of every age.

—from *Hoping Against All Hope* by Dom Helder Camara (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, copyright 1984), used with permission.

Prayer: Open my eyes and ears

O Lord, open my eyes that I may see the needs of others
Open my ears that I may hear their cries;
Open my heart so that they need not be without succor;
Let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong,
Nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.
Show me where love and hope and faith are needed,
And use me to bring them to those places.
And so open my eyes and my ears that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee.
Amen.

—Alan Paton (1903–1988), from franciscanaction.org/prayers

Prayer of confession

Lord, forgive us when we seek easy answers to complex problems and shy away from reconciliation. Forgive us when we veil harm under a pretense of nonviolence. In our confession, give us hearts of mercy and eyes of love that seek peace and reconciliation first.

Songs

VT 36 *Let Us Build a House*
HWB 408 *O Day of Peace*
Justicia, The Porter’s Gate,
Tina Colón Williams*
Instrument of Peace, The Porter’s Gate*

HWB = *Hymnal: A Worship Book*
VT = *Voices Together* hymnal
*Find on Spotify/YouTube
Facts & figures: sanctions

61 years
Number of years Cuba has been under a U.S. trade embargo. Sanctions have failed to achieve stated U.S. foreign policy goals, while at the same time exacerbating poverty.

U.S. sanctions impacted:

5 countries in 2001
21 countries in 2021

SANCTIONS IN IRAN

Household income ↓ 38%
Education spending per child ↓ 74%

27% of countries
Sanctioned in 2023*

29% of global GDP
Sanctioned in 2023*

*Countries impacted by sanctions imposed by the United States, the United Nations, and/or the European Union.
U.S. policy on sanctions should . . .

**Study the impacts**
Study the humanitarian and policy impacts of economic sanctions and refrain from using them where they cause significant harm to ordinary people.

**Prioritize diplomacy**
Prioritize diplomacy, engaging in good-faith negotiation rather than immediately escalating a situation through increasingly strict sanctions.

**Consider the global impact**
Recognize the interconnection of global financial systems and consider how U.S. sanctions can have significant economic impacts on non-sanctioned countries. Work in broad coalitions of countries when imposing sanctions, rather than acting alone.

**Use sanctions as a last resort**
Use sanctions as a last resort, as one drastic tool in a toolbox that includes more peaceful alternatives. Fully fund localized, preventative peacebuilding programs such as: community violence prevention; youth programming; protection for civil society and human rights defenders; and programs incentivizing transparency and good governance.

**Ensure sanctions are narrow**
When sanctions are used, ensure they are narrow, targeted, and have appropriate humanitarian exemptions. Ensure humanitarian exemptions are broad enough to cover the activities and necessary services that humanitarian organizations rely on to do their work. Consider who is calling for sanctions: Is the request coming from vulnerable/affected groups? In limited cases, sanctions against individual human rights violators can reduce their legitimacy and power. Care should be taken, however, to consider how even narrow sanctions might affect opportunities for diplomacy or have broader effects as political power shifts—and whether sanctions will actually meet their stated goal.

Resources for learning more

**Center for Economic and Policy Research**
The human consequences of economic sanctions
cepr.net/report/the-human-consequences-of-economic-sanctions

**Sanctions as war** (book)
Stuart Davis, Haymarket, 2021

The history and future of U.S. sanctions policy (video)
usip.org/events/history-and-future-us-sanctions-policy

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