# First be reconciled

## U.S. policy on sanctions

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Sanctions are often seen as an attractive alternative to warfare. But are sanctions truly nonviolent?

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. ■

*Above: Palmira, where a Brethren in Christ training center is located, is a small town in southwestern Cuba. Like many rural areas, it continues to experience shortages and blackouts related to the complicated economic situation in Cuba.* MCC photo/Annalee Giesbrecht

# A peaceful alternative?

## Examining U.S. sanctions policy

by Zachary Murray

### 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 Willson 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.

### 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.


*Top: MCC technician Ken Minoda, left, reviews plans for installing equipment in a soap factory in Kampuchea (now Cambodia) with government official Dee, standing, and members of the Ministry of Industry, in 1984. Cambodia's recovery in the 1980s was crippled by sanctions imposed by the U.S. because of Vietnam's occupation in the country.* MCC photo/Bert Lobe *Right: A container loaded with relief supplies at the Material Resources Center (MRC) in Ephrata, Pennsylvania.* MCC photo/Rudi Niessen


*Unable to import newer models, many Cubans are dependent on pre-U.S. embargo era vehicles. The creativity and ingenuity that keeps these cars running embodies the Cuban spirit of invention, but also illustrates the harmful effects of sanctions and trade embargoes.* MCC photo/Annalee Giesbrecht

## 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. Counterintuitively, 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.

# Worship resources

## 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.

## Scripture readings

1 John 3:17, Matthew 5:38-42

## Sermon ideas

Sermon on the Mount: Do not retaliate against your neighbors but seek reconciliation. Build peace in the midst of conflict; do not cause further harm. Reflect on how U.S. sanctions have been used to harm our neighbors.

Do not seek to act out of passion (Matthew 5:21–26) but live a radical mercy (38–42). We are called to live without retribution in our relationships. In foreign policy, this means loving, merciful justice through diplomacy.

## 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

## IMPORTANT ADDRESSES

Senator _____
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510
(202) 224-3121
senate.gov

Representative _____
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 224-3121
house.gov

President Joseph Biden
The White House
Washington, DC 20500
(202) 456-1111
whitehouse.gov/contact

## GET INVOLVED!

- Check out our website at **npjm.mcc.org**.
- Sign up to receive **action alerts** and the monthly **E-Memo**.
- Follow us on **Twitter** at twitter.com/mccwashington.

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All biblical quotes are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

# Facts & figures: **sanctions**

MCC photo/Bonnie Klassen

MCC photo/Annalee Giesbrecht

## 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.

## 27 % of countries

Sanctioned in 2023*

## 29 % of global GDP

Sanctioned in 2023*

MCC photo/Bonnie Klassen

**U.S. sanctions impacted:**

**5** countries in **2001**

**21** countries in **2021**

## THE EFFECT OF SANCTIONS IN IRAN

(2006–2015)

Household income

↓38%

Education spending per child

↓74%


MCC photo/Annalee Giesbrecht

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*Countries impacted by sanctions imposed by the United States, the United Nations, and/or the European Union.

*Sources: Center for Economic and Policy Research, World Economics Association, "Hunger Politics: Sanctions as Siege Warfare," in* Sanctions as War *(2021).*

# Policy Principles

## U.S. policy on sanctions should . . .


MCC photo/Rudi Niessen

### 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

MCC photo/Diana Voth

*For more than 100 years, MCC has provided humanitarian relief in complex locations, including in countries sanctioned by the U.S government.*

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