

Sanctions hit the innocent

Millions of livelihoods affected worldwide

by Thomas Scherr

Time and again, governments of influential states “punish” other states. The “punishments” often consist of banning trade for certain things or restricting exports and imports. This may involve food, medicines, financial transactions or technical parts. But what do these measures, known as “sanctions,” mean for the population?

From the media we hear again and again that “sanctions” have been imposed on this or that state. After a brief explanation, which may seem plausible, the report disappears from the daily news. But what are sanctions and what are their consequences?

Coercive measures against another state

Sanctions between states are not unproblematic, even if the definitions and explanations sound relatively harmless. For example, one website states: “Sanctions are coercive measures taken by several states against another state if the latter has violated its obligations under international law or fails to fulfil obligations it has assumed. The enforcement of obligations under international law through sanctions is particularly important in the world organisations – the League of Nations and the United Nations – for the maintenance of peace, the localisation of armed conflicts.”¹ Or in an article from a business dictionary it says about sanctions: “Political measures of punishment of a certain behaviour or course of action (negative reinforcement). Often in the form of decisions taken by the UN Security Council or by the EU under the Common Foreign or Security Policy (CFSP). A sanction is the basis for an embargo”.²

Not only the UN imposes sanctions

Sanctions are not only imposed on individual states by institutions under international law, but also by states or groups of states, and even without UN legitimacy. But what remains in the public consciousness is that these are “just” measures, which are assumed to be linked to the peaceful intentions of the UN. Regardless of who imposes the sanctions, they are often highly



Through sanctions, the West is actively preventing the reconstruction of Syria. This is like continuing the war by other means. (Picture keystone/EPA/Mohammed Badra)

problematic when they affect the population. This has moral and material consequences.

One state that has been affected by “sanctions” for a long time is Iran. The country with over 85 million inhabitants has been subject to various sanctions by different states and organisations since 1979. First by the USA and its allies, later by the UN for violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.³ In addition to the question of whether sanctions are “appropriate” or who is allowed and able to judge this, the serious effects on the civilian population should also become the focus of public interest in the future.

Iran – innocents are punished

The punitive measures against Iran have been very harsh. They affect the entire Iranian population, including children, the sick, the elderly, young people, and most severely the already poorer people. The export ban on medicines, technical equipment, loans and other goods and services has life-threatening consequences. An example: the question arises why an Iranian citizen, or someone who lives there, is no longer allowed to receive vital medicines from abroad. The person has nothing to do with the occupation of the US embassy in 1979 or with Iranian depleted uranium. The export ban on medicines directly threatens the lives of innocent people.

Another example shows how the entire population becomes a victim of economic sanctions:

because car businesses, for example, can no longer obtain spare parts from abroad, many of these companies and all their employees have been ruined. Due to the economic sanctions, companies in other sectors have also had to give up their businesses, lay off employees and abandon their families to their fate.

Sanctions primarily affect those who are not involved. They threaten livelihoods and deprive millions of people of their future prospects. However, sanctions such as those against the people of Iran are not an isolated case.

Syria – population held “hostage”

However, if one assesses the 10-year conflict in Syria, the “sanctions” against the population of this country – in which the EU and thus Switzerland (see below) are also significantly involved – primarily affect an impoverished civilian population that has been severely damaged by the war.⁴ First was the country devastated by war, (which, contrary to international law, has still not been declared to be over). Now the urgent needed reconstruction is being actively prevented by the continuation of “sanctions” by the USA and the EU.⁵ Here, too, the question arises as to what right the population living there is being taken “hostage”. Why are millions of livelihoods being destroyed? Doctors and teachers cannot be paid and school buildings and hospitals can no longer be renovated. The money is missing because the economy continues to be deliberately crippled by “sanctions”. The Syrian state lacks tax revenues for necessary expenditures. These sanctions do not affect the government, but the population. They are impoverished and starving, and the stronger ones are fleeing to Europe.

Allowing food prices to rise

Sanctions have become a weapon aimed primarily at the population. Thus, opinions about the Venezuelan government vary widely. But regardless of whether one considers the government legitimate or not, the question arises: which offence was committed by a small farmer who has to feed a large family so that he no longer gets diesel for his harvesting machine?⁶ And what will the already beleaguered Venezuelan population say if food prices rise rapidly again this year because of this?

Holding a population hostage for acts they may not even know about is simply unjust and

inhumane. Internationally active human rights experts, such as the former UN Special Envoy *Alfred de Zayas*, have repeatedly pointed out that such sanctions are a crying injustice.⁷ They violate human rights and International Law and only affect the poorest. “Sanctions always hit the wrong people: above all the poor”, headlines *Christian Müller* in *Infosperber* on 7 June. He asks: “Do the USA and the EU know what they are doing when they impose sanctions?”⁸ One can assume that the populations in the USA and the EU do not know – but their governments and officials do.

“Less drastic than military action”

It is distressing when governments of Western states use “sanctions” as a political tool even outside the UN. These sanctions ultimately come at the expense of millions of innocent existences that they have never seen and who have never harmed them.

The perversion of this way of thinking becomes clear when the “unsuccessfulness” of such measures is publicly discussed in the press. At the same time, it is noted what is at stake: “They [economic sanctions] are often less drastic than military action. They can be a signal of support for the opposition, at a relatively low costs.”⁹ Impoverishment, premature death and destitution in the affected countries were not included in this calculation.

Perverse: torture population until it “rebels”

Behind the sanctions policy is the idea that the people of a foreign country must be forced to vote out of office or overthrow their government and only then would they be taken care of again. If one transfers this barbaric idea to one’s own situation, the perversion becomes particularly clear: some government of a foreign country is dissatisfied with a decision of “my” government. The foreign government decides to harm our country together with other governments – until our government gives in or is overthrown by us.

It is obvious that in this way, under the well-sounding terms of “law” and “democracy”, other interests are to be enforced than those provided for in the UN Charter. International law, which has been developed over the past 500 centuries, is completely perverted, especially when the “sanctions” are imposed in the name of democratically legitimised governments.

Who “punishes” in whose name?

The final question remains, who takes the liberty of starving the defenceless, cutting them off from medicine or plunging them into poverty?

Even if it is the case that democratically elected governments make a decision for a “sanction” or go along with such a decision – because they give a sanction its “legality” with their signature – it is mostly powerful internationally networked lobby groups that bring about such decisions. Their motives rarely have anything to do with “justice”. More often, it is banal self-interested financial advantages or power-political calculations.¹⁰ But with their actions they are responsible for the misery of millions of people.

Sanctions – as an act of war

Thus sanctions are a “cheap” war measure below a “hot” war. It seems as if the peace-keeping idea from the UN Charter of the founding time has been lost and sanctions are misused as a method of cheap warfare. But shouldn't sanctions in future be honestly considered to be acts of war?

International humanitarian law has raised awareness worldwide that a civilian population must be protected in war-like situations and has minimal protection rights even under war conditions.¹¹ These rights must now also be applied in the case of sanctions.

It is unacceptable that even in the 21st century, defenceless and innocent people become victims of egoistic power politics under the spin of “just” action and in the “name of the United Nations”.

Reconsidering sanctions

“Since 1990, Switzerland participated autonomously in non-military sanctions imposed by the United Nations Organisation (UNO). With its accession to the UN, the implementation of non-military coercive measures issued by the UN Security Council has become binding for Switzerland under international law.”¹² At the same time, Switzerland also participated in sanctions outside the UN.“ In 1998, Switzerland participated for the first time in economic sanctions outside the UN, namely against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, after the EU had issued such sanction measures”.¹³ Officially, the following terse statement was made about this unilateral participation: “Supporting internationally broad-based sanctions is in the interest of

Switzerland's foreign policy, which is oriented towards compliance with international law and humanitarian values. Solidarity with the United Nations and the need to take efficient action against a lawbreaker are also decision-making elements that the Federal Council takes into account”.¹⁴ Even then, this position was extremely questionable. The international sanctions policy practiced today no longer does justice to this view. Even if it is a balancing act in terms of economic and neutrality policy to represent the position of a small state internationally and to withstand the enormous pressure of foreign interests, our country risks losing its credibility internationally. Today's sanctions policy needs to be reconsidered, and not only in Switzerland.

(Translation Swiss Standpoint)

¹ Cf. <https://www.wissen.de/was-sind-sanktionen>, Download on 7 April 2021

² Cf. Carsten Weerth, Main Customs Office Bremen, Lecturer at the FOM University of Applied Sciences for Economics and Management on: <https://wirtschaftslexikon.gabler.de/definition/sanktion-45185/version-268482>, download from 7 April 2021

³ There may well be grounds within the UN framework to take appropriate international measures against a government that violates international agreements, such as the prohibition of wars of aggression. Only Iran's violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty has been subject to double standards: Pakistan, India or Israel have not yet been sanctioned by the UN. Cf. Heinz Gärtner: “The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”. In: *International. Zeitschrift für internationale Politik*. Issue 3/2020

⁴ Cf. <https://www.dw.com/de/syrien-hunger-in-der-einstigen-kornkammer/a-56839525>. Even Deutsche Welle – certainly not a broadcaster critical of the US – writes on 15 March 2021: “Syria has long been on sanctions lists of the US, and for ten years the country has also been subject to sanctions by the EU. In mid-June 2020, the US government under Donald Trump added to this list with the so-called Caesar sanctions. [...] The Caesar sanctions also threaten non-US citizens and entities with punishment if they do business with Syria.”

⁵ While the West is still imposing sanctions on Syria, at the same time millions are being invested in “reconstruction aid” across the northern border controlled by Turkey into the sphere of influence of the terrorist organisation *Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS). Middle East expert *Karin Leukefeld* describes the dispute over the control of access to Syria and the argument about this before the UN Security Council at the beginning of July 2021: “The Indian UN representative *T. S. Tirumurti*, on the other hand, demanded comprehensive support for all inhabitants of Syria, which had once been the ‘pivot of Arab culture’ and a leading voice in the region. Discrimination, preconditions and the politicization of aid to Syria must come to an end. The adopted resolution 2585 provides aid to the people in the northwest of Syria, but the Secu-

rity Council must also address the rest of the country, which is in urgent need of reconstruction assistance. There will only be stability if Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity are preserved. Only this will ensure that foreign actors cannot further destabilize the situation in Syria." Cf. *Zeit-Fragen* Nr.16 from 13 July 2021 (<https://www.zeit-fragen.ch/archiv/2021/nr-16-13-juli-2021/un-sicherheitsrat-findet-kompromiss-im-streit-ueber-grenzueberschreitende-hilfslieferungen.html>)

⁶ The USA has imposed a ban on diesel exports to Venezuela. <https://amerika21.de/2021/05/250889/venezuela-ab-lehnung-us-diesel-sanktionen> on 27 May 2021 and Medication ban: <https://amerika21.de/2021/07/252776/venezuela-krebspatienten-us-sanktionen> from 25 July 2021

⁷ Cf. Statements by former UN staffer Alfred de Zayas, Hans-Christoph Graf von Sponeck, Denis Halliday

⁸ Cf. Christian Müller: "Sanctions always hit the wrong people: especially the poor", in: *infosperber* from 6 July 2021

⁹ Cf. "e sanctions smart or helpless?", in: *Neue Zürcher*

Zeitung on 6 January 2021 on the Peterson Institute's study on the "effectiveness" of sanctions.

¹⁰ Cf. Eberhard Hamer. Are economic sanctions cold war or already hot war? In: <https://www.goldseiten.de/artikel/501085-Sind-Wirtschaftssanktionen-kalter-oder-schon-heisser-Krieg.html> from 7 April 2021

¹¹ Cf. Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. Concluded at Geneva, 12 August 1949; https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1951/300_302_297/de, download from 16 July 2021

¹² Cf. https://www.seco.admin.ch/seco/de/home/Aussenwirtschaftspolitik_Wirtschaftliche_Zusammenarbeit/Wirtschaftsbeziehungen/exportkontrollen-und-sanktionen/sanktionen-embargos/die-schweiz-und-internationale-sanktionen.html, download from 16 July 2021

¹³ Cf. https://www.seco.admin.ch/seco/de/home/Aussenwirtschaftspolitik_Wirtschaftliche_Zusammenarbeit/Wirtschaftsbeziehungen/exportkontrollen-und-sanktionen/sanktionen-embargos/die-schweiz-und-internationale-sanktionen.html, download from 16 July 2021

¹⁴ *ibid.*