**The Ethics of Sanctions**

(Summary of the latest thoughts by HDPI’s Ethical Decision-Making Group)

If, as Carl von Clausewitz said, war is the continuation of politics by other means, then perhaps the adoption of sanctions is the prevention of war by economic means. In the last sixty years, economic and political sanctions have been imposed—unilaterally or multi-laterally---against Cuba, South Africa, Israel, Nicaragua, Myanmar, North Korea, Iraq, Venezuela, Syria, Zimbabwe and Russia, among many others. Usually, the decision to do so responds to a perceived political action by the targeted state that violates basic tenets of human rights or international law, e.g., apartheid, racism, external aggression, oppression of internal minorities, nuclear proliferation, etc.

Certainly, sanctions are preferable to outright military action, in that they tend to produce less overt violence and destruction. But are they an ethical tool of political action? Sanctions rarely function as they are intended. They have been recognized as a notoriously blunt instrument, often failing to affect those most responsible for decision-making within a society, while causing great hardship for the general public. In some cases, the political leadership of the targeted country perceives of and/or portrays the sanctions as a hostile act equivalent to warfare, and uses them to rally public support or to justify their actions. Sanctions also tend to have ancillary, knock-on impacts that may punish other nations far beyond the one targeted. Finally, sanctions are not consistently imposed against all countries responsible for similar violations of rights or international law.

A quick checklist, then, to guide the decision on when to impose economic or political sanctions:

1. Are they likely to work (i.e., induce a policy change)? Arguably, sanctions against apartheid South Africa had a strong moral/economic impact; those against North Korea less so.
2. Will they affect those responsible for decision-making? Targeting sanctions against the elites of a society (e.g., identifying members of the nomenklatura and their families) will be more ethical than punishing the poorest members of the society.
3. How long should they be applied? Sanctions can take a long time to have the intended effect on decision makers, while causing suffering among the vulnerable, as well as unintended consequences elsewhere. At what point do they cause more harm than good?
4. How will they affect other countries? If imposing sanctions against Russia will provoke grain shortages and starvation in sub-Saharan Africa, then this poses serious ethical challenges.
5. Is the decision to impose sanctions in this case equitable or objective? Have other nations which have engaged in the same behaviour been equally punished in this fashion?

Conclusion: Be wary of sanctions as the go-to political action of choice…