



AFRICA PROGRAM OCCASIONAL PAPER

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In recent years, the United States Department of Treasury has imposed targeted sanctions on some war-affected African countries, often in response to pleas by activist groups in the United States or Europe. Advocates see these sanctions as the only way to deal with corrupt, autocratic, and violent regimes in which some government officials and their business associates allegedly take advantage of civil wars to amass wealth for themselves and promote those wars as means of profiteering. The activists, claiming that corrupt individuals have captured the state, argue for exacting better political behavior out of these leaders by targeting them with sanctions, including asset freezes, travel bans, and attacking their business networks.

In a recent *African Arguments* piece on U.S. sanctions against Sudan, John Prendergast of the Enough Project—a Washington-based activist group that led the drive for recent sanctions against South Sudan—asserted that sanctions have evolved significantly over the past two decades from the “sledgehammer” to the “scalpel.” His argument advanced the idea that sanctions can be precisely targeted at individuals and their Pressure

are a far cry from sanctions imposed elsewhere, (for example, by the United States against Sudan's al-Bashir regime for sponsoring terrorism, by the United States and others against Iran for enriching uranium to nuclear-weapon grade, or by the UN Security Council against Saddam Hussein's Iraq following its 1990 invasion of Kuwait).² In theory, the idea of targeted sanctions is smart. However, the concept of "smart sanctions" has long been contested by mounting evidence that a very thin line separates the application and enforcement of targeted sanctions versus other forms of sanctions, with the impact on ordinary people being the same.³ A Global Policy Forum article entitled "Smart Sanctions on Iran are Dumb" condemned sanctions targeting Iran's oil and gas industries for hurting the country's populace at large. Because Iran's "economy is dependent on its energy sector," the authors argued that sanctioning this sector deprived the Iranian government of income needed for popular food and housing subsidies.⁴

There are several fundamental problems with sanctions, targeted or not, especially as applied to countries at war, such as Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), or the Central African Republic:

1. First, information linking business networks to corrupt officials faces real credibility problems. Evidence is often acquired through leaks of unverifiable information from government offices, or via interviews with anti-government whistleblowers who might be more interested in implicating their government than in disclosing factual information. A report by The Sentry, an anti-corruption outlet created by Hollywood star George Clooney and associated with the Enough Project, was the

4. Finally, and perhaps most important, is that to date the sanctioning countries have skirted around the political-military leaders who hold real decision-making power in the targeted country. For example, it is hard to imagine that South Sudan's rampant corruption is happening without the knowledge of the most senior government officials, from ministers to vice presidents all the way to the president—the very officials in whose hands lie decisions of war and peace. But to date targeted sanctions have not reached that high. The sparing of the real political and military machinery that makes decisions signals to those lower-rung officials who are targeted that they can go on enjoying the protection of the real power brokers who are spared. This is not to argue that the head of state be indicted on corruption charges, but rather to point out that sanctions cannot be an effective policy instrument.

The Case of South Sudan

Sanctions have created a heated debate in South Sudan about their real value, perhaps even further stoking

deep-seated malfeasance but are based on activist campaigns that have missed the point about the nature of corruption in countries suffering from malgovernance.

The obvious culprits are war, instability, and the weakness of state institutions. Sanctions will not stop the war; in fact, they can deepen the divides and harden the political positions that fueled the conflict in the first place. Building peace brick by brick is a function of state institutions being structured, empowered, and used by citizens to challenge the political-military class on the poor governance that stokes violence. Supporting state institutions instead of levying sanctions could have the twin benefit of building sustainable stability and forging goodwill among the citizens of the countries involved.

International players such as the United States and European Union, who draw upon campaigns by Western entities seen by some as non-neutral or bent on “regime change” in their decisions to impose sanctions, are avoiding more difficult options to address conflict.

These options include hands-on diplomacy, including providing support to judicial institutions in the targeted countries such that counter-corruption efforts enjoy local buy-in and a chance to shape the country's political future. Therein lies the potential for the citizens of the targeted countries to become the champions of their political destiny such that within a generation, sanctions will be less tempting as tools for political change.

Western activist groups should share their findings with local activists in countries like South Sudan. Civil society could then use these findings to test the limits of their judicial system and the willingness of oversight institutions such as the Parliament, Audit Chamber, and Anti-Corruption Commission to live up to their mandates. Urgent change is needed to reduce atrocities, stop the war, and channel South Sudan's resources toward the welfare of its citizens and away from financing the war. But sanctions will not accelerate this change and in fact, can deepen the factors that caused the crisis to begin with. It is best to come to terms with the reality that statecraft is a slow game, and any investment in it is likely to be more

It is important to support African counter-corruption champions by arming them with evidence of

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