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## THE PARADOW OF SANCTIONS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ZIMBABWE'S EXPERIENCE

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**Abstract:** *Sanctions have been a common tool used by states and international organizations to address political crises and human rights abuses. Zimbabwe, in particular, has been the subject of multiple sanctions regimes over the past two decades, aimed at pressuring its government to implement democratic reforms and improve human rights conditions. This article examines the effectiveness of past sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe from a multidimensional perspective. It highlights the limitations of the measures in achieving their intended political objectives and their unintended socio-economic consequences. The article also explores the inadequate coordination and enforcement of the sanctions and the failure to address the root causes of the crisis. Lastly, it discusses the negative impact of the sanctions on international relations. The analysis emphasizes the need for a coordinated and comprehensive approach to sanctions, addressing enforcement challenges and minimizing unintended negative consequences on the civilian population.*

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**Keywords:** sanctions, democracy, effectiveness, human rights, political crisis.

### 1. Introduction

Zimbabwe has experienced significant political and economic challenges over the past two decades, marked by human rights abuses, economic decline, and political instability. In response to these developments, the international community has imposed various sanctions on the country, primarily targeting individuals and entities associated with the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). These measures were intended to pressure the government to implement democratic reforms and address human rights abuses. However, the effectiveness of these sanctions remains a subject of debate, with critics arguing

that they have failed to achieve their objectives and even contributed to unintended negative consequences.

The work at hand aims to critically examine the past sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe by the international community, with a focus on their impact and effectiveness. Together, we will explore the various grounds on which the sanctions have been criticized, including their limited effectiveness in achieving political objectives, unintended socio-economic consequences, potential reinforcement of the regime's grip on power, inadequate coordination and enforcement, failure to address the root causes of the crisis, and negative impact on international relations.

Drawing on existing literature and analysis, this article provides an overview of the challenges facing the international community in using sanctions as a tool for promoting democratic reforms and improving human rights conditions in Zimbabwe. By examining these challenges in detail, we will contribute to a better understanding of the limitations and potential of sanctions as a policy tool for addressing complex political crises.

Ultimately, the article aims to provide insights and some recommendations for future efforts to address the crisis in Zimbabwe, highlighting the need for a more coordinated and comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of the crisis and minimizes unintended negative consequences.

Methodologically, the article is reliant on a review of the literature devoted to the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool of foreign policy, with a particular focus on the case of Zimbabwe. The study adopts a critical perspective, acknowledging that the said type of literature is highly contested and often polarized. We do not seek to take a normative stance on the use of sanctions as a foreign policy tool; rather aiming to provide a nuanced assessment of the limitations of using the sanctions toolbox on Zimbabwe.

The study draws on a range of theoretical frameworks, including neorealism, liberalism, constructivism, and critical security studies, to provide a multi-dimensional analysis of the effectiveness of sanctions, but for the scope of this particular research all said frameworks are implicit rather than explicated.

## 2. Background information on Zimbabwe

In order to understand the context of the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe, it is essential to briefly explore the country's historical, political, and economic background. To set the tone, if one may. This part of the paper provides a brief and condensed overview of Zimbabwe's history leading up to the imposition of sanctions, focusing on key developments that influenced the international community's decision to impose sanctions.

Zimbabwe gained independence from British colonial rule in 1980, following a protracted armed struggle led by various nationalist groups, including the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). Upon achieving independence, the country adopted a new constitution and held elections, which resulted in a victory for the ZANU party led by Robert Mugabe. Initially, the new government pursued a policy of national reconciliation, seeking to integrate former adversaries and promote social and economic development.

However, by the mid-1980s, tensions between ZANU and ZAPU escalated, leading to a brutal state-sponsored crackdown on opposition in the regions predominantly inhabited by the Ndebele ethnic group. Known as Gukurahundi<sup>1</sup>, this period of violence resulted in thousands of deaths and established a pattern of repression and human rights abuses by the Mugabe regime (Sachikonye, 2011, p. 27). Later, the two parties merged to form ZANU-PF.

In the early 1990s, Zimbabwe's government embarked on a series of economic liberalization policies under the guidance of international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These reforms, however, failed to deliver sustained economic growth, and by the late 1990s, the country was grappling with high unemployment, inflation, and a growing fiscal deficit (Petrica, 2020a, pp 122-135).

The late 1990s also witnessed the emergence of a strong opposition movement, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which challenged the dominance of the ruling ZANU-PF party. The MDC's rise was partly fueled by the government's controversial land reform program, which involved the forcible seizure of white-owned commercial farms and their redistribution to landless black Zimbabweans. The land reform led to widespread economic

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<sup>1</sup> In the Shona language this translates into "*the early rain which washes away the chaff before the spring rains*".

disruption, food shortages, and a dramatic decline in agricultural production (Mlambo, 2014, p. 286).

The 2000s marked a period of political crisis and economic decline in Zimbabwe, characterized by contested elections, political violence, and widespread human rights abuses (Petrica, 2020a). The country had been ruled by President Robert Mugabe since 1980, until he was ousted in 2017, after a military coup. Mugabe's regime was marked by authoritarianism, corruption, and human rights abuses, leading to international condemnation and the imposition of sanctions.

The current government, led by President Emmerson Mnangagwa, has promised to reform the country's economy and improve its human rights record. However, progress has been slow, and the country continues to face challenges in areas such as governance, corruption, and the rule of law (US Department of State, 2022).

In conclusion, Zimbabwe's short-term history leading up to the imposition of sanctions is marked by a complex interplay of historical, political, and economic factors. The country's struggle for independence, early promise, and subsequent descent into political and economic crisis set the stage for the international community's decision to impose sanctions in an attempt to address the widespread human rights abuses and promote democratic reforms.

### **3. What are sanctions and why do they matter?**

International sanctions are a key tool used by states and international organizations to influence the behavior of other states. Sanctions involve imposing economic, political, or social restrictions on a country or group of individuals to achieve specific policy objectives. Sanctions have been used to address a variety of issues, including human rights abuses, weapons proliferation, military aggression, and terrorism.

Sanctions are important in international relations for several reasons. First, they are considered by many a cost-effective non-military way to achieve foreign policy goals. Sanctions are typically less expensive and less risky than military intervention, making them a far more attractive option for actors seeking to alter states' behaviors.

Second, sanctions are normative methods of coercion or deterrence. For coercion purposes, they are designed to deter and punish violators, while also reinforcing societal norms

and expected behavior. As a means of deterrence, they can provide ways for states to demonstrate their commitment to international principles, values and norms, and the overall rules based international order. Sanctions are often imposed in response to violations of international law or human rights abuses, sending a signal that the international community will not tolerate such behavior (Hufbauer *et al.*, 2007, p. 16).

Third, sanctions can be a means of achieving collective action among states. By imposing sanctions collectively, states can signal their commitment to a particular issue and increase the likelihood of achieving policy objectives (Hufbauer *et al.*, 2007, p. 21). Concerted efforts can also lead to bandwagoning, whereby non-aligned nations join a collective action in order to avoid being left out of the action undertaken by their peers.

However, sanctions are not always effective and can have unintended consequences. The weight of scholarly opinion argues that sanctions can harm the civilian population of the designated state, exacerbate human rights abuses, and undermine economic development – even when targeted. Targeted sanctions, also known as smart sanctions or selective sanctions, are measures imposed by international actors such as governments or organizations to address specific concerns or objectives without causing widespread harm to the general population. These sanctions typically focus on individuals, entities, or sectors that are directly associated with the behavior or actions that the international actors seek to change or condemn. Targeted sanctions have been increasingly employed by the international community in recent decades, as their use is seen as a more effective and ethical approach to addressing issues such as human rights abuses, conflict resolution, and nonproliferation.

Moreover, the entire process of imposing sanctions can sometimes become a cat-and-mouse game, as targeted countries can identify ways to evade punitive measures, thereby reducing their effectiveness.

Despite these challenges, sanctions remain an important tool in international relations. As global challenges continue to emerge, they will likely continue to be used as a means of influencing the behavior of other states. The unprecedented level of sanctions deployed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 stands witness to that.

#### **4. Brief overview of the existing literature on sanctions in Zimbabwe**

Over the years, there has been a significant amount of academic research on the topic of sanctions in Zimbabwe. Scholars have analyzed the effectiveness of sanctions in achieving their policy objectives, as well as their impact on the Zimbabwean economy and civilian population. While providing an exhaustive account of all authors is neither possible nor desirable, the contributions of some authors are worth pointing out.

One of the critical aspects of studying sanctions in Zimbabwe is assessing their effectiveness in achieving the intended policy objectives – which has also been discussed in what follows. Chan and Drury (2000) provide a comprehensive analysis of sanctions' success in general, concluding that they have a limited capacity to achieve their goals. The theme is masterfully applied by Grebe (2010), who offers an analysis of the origins and implications of sanctions in Zimbabwe. The author argues that sanctions were imposed primarily as a response to the Zimbabwean government's human rights abuses and land reform policies. Grebe also highlights the limited effectiveness of sanctions in achieving their policy objectives, particularly in terms of promoting democratic change.

Sanctions' impact on the Zimbabwean economy is another recurring theme in the literature. Peksen (2009) argues that economic sanctions generally have adverse effects on the targeted country's economy, while Eaton and Engers (1992) discuss how sanctions can disrupt trade and discourage foreign investment. In the context of Zimbabwe, Meldrum (2006) offers a detailed account of the economic decline in the country following the imposition of sanctions, attributing it to a combination of factors, including mismanagement, corruption, and the adverse effects of the sanctions themselves. Mlambo (2014) also examines the consequences of sanctions on Zimbabwe's economy during the early 2000s, finding that they had a limited direct impact but contributed to an atmosphere of uncertainty and deterred foreign investment. Similarly, while providing a radical analysis of the fossilization of Zimbabwean nationalism, including its failures to install democracy and a culture of human rights, Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009) argues that sanctions exacerbated Zimbabwe's economic decline by limiting access to international finance and discouraging foreign investment.

The effects of sanctions on the civilian population have also been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. Hove and Ndawana (2016) investigate how targeted sanctions have affected the socio-economic rights of ordinary citizens in Zimbabwe. Tendi (2010; pp. 185-200) argues that sanctions failed to bring about meaningful political change and instead served to strengthen the ruling ZANU-PF party which was becoming increasingly authoritarian.

Some authors focus on the broader regional and international implications of the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe. Mavhinga (2011) investigates the role of the African Union (AU) and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in shaping the sanctions regime, emphasizing the importance of regional actors in influencing the outcomes.

Despite the diverse perspectives offered by these studies, the overall consensus in the literature seems to be that sanctions have had a limited impact on achieving their policy objectives in Zimbabwe. Moreover, they have had negative consequences for the economy and civilian population, particularly in the areas of healthcare and education (Mbanje and Mahuku, 2011; Ogbonna, 2017).

## **5. Goals and implementation of the sanctions on Zimbabwe**

The primary goal of the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe was to address concerns over human rights abuses, political repression, and electoral fraud. In particular, the sanctions aimed to pressure the Mugabe-led government to adopt democratic reforms, restore the rule of law, and respect human rights. These objectives were articulated by the European Union (EU) and the United States when they imposed targeted sanctions.

In the case of Zimbabwe, sanctions primarily took the form of targeted measures, such as asset freezes and travel bans on key government officials and their associates (Mlambo, 2014, p. 274).

The United States imposed targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe in 2001 through the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (ZDERA). ZDERA targeted key members of the Mugabe regime and their associates by freezing their assets and imposing travel bans, making it difficult for them to conduct business and engage with the international community (ZDERA, 2001). Additionally, Section 4(c) of ZDERA restricted Zimbabwe's access to

international financial institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, which severely limited the country's ability to access external credit and financial assistance.

The European Union (EU) followed suit in 2002, imposing a series of targeted sanctions against Zimbabwe, including asset freezes, travel bans, and an arms embargo (European Union, 2002). These sanctions were specifically aimed at individuals responsible for human rights violations, undermining the rule of law, and electoral fraud. Similar to the US sanctions, the EU measures targeted high-ranking government officials, military personnel, and members of the ruling ZANU-PF party. Over the years that followed, the EU incrementally increased the number of people included in its list, with the count reaching its highest point in January 2009 at 203 individuals and 40 entities.

In addition to the US and EU sanctions, other countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand also imposed targeted sanctions on Zimbabwe (Mlambo, 2014, p. 293). These measures, like those of the US and EU, focused on travel bans, asset freezes, and other restrictions targeting key members of the Mugabe regime and their associates.

After the Global Political Agreement was signed in 2009, which saw Mugabe sharing power with two opposition factions' leaders, the EU began easing some of the sanctions it had imposed on Zimbabwe. The EU still maintains sanctions on Zimbabwe Defense Industries.

## **6. Outcomes and effectiveness of the sanctions at a glance**

The effectiveness of sanctions in achieving their objectives is a matter of considerable debate. Some scholars argue that the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe had limited impact on the Mugabe regime, as they failed to induce meaningful democratic reforms or improvements in human rights conditions (Mlambo, 2014, pp. 276-277). They contend that the targeted nature of the sanctions allowed the regime to deflect the blame for the country's economic woes onto external forces, thereby undermining the sanctions' intended objectives (Raftopoulos, 2009, p. 216).

In addition, the sanctions may have unintentionally strengthened the regime's grip on power by increasing its reliance on resources from countries that were less concerned with human rights and democracy, such as China (Taylor, 2009, pp. 99-100). This has led some critics



to argue that the sanctions effectively pushed Zimbabwe further away from the international community and reduced the likelihood of a negotiated political settlement.

On the other hand, some analysts argue that the sanctions played a role in prompting the formation of the Government of National Unity in 2009, which resulted in a temporary power-sharing agreement between Mugabe's ZANU-PF party and the opposition MDC. They also suggest that the sanctions helped to mobilize international support for democratic reforms in Zimbabwe (Drezner, 2011, p. 104).

However, it is important to consider the socio-economic consequences of the sanctions, which many argue have been detrimental to the Zimbabwean population (Mlambo, 2014, pp. 276-277). The sanctions have been blamed for exacerbating the country's economic crisis, which has led to hyperinflation, unemployment, and widespread poverty. Critics of the sanctions argue that they have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable segments of the population, including the poor, women, and children, while having minimal impact on the political elite targeted by the measures (Mlambo, 2014, pp. 276-277).

Moreover, we argue that the sanctions have had other consequences, such as fostering a parallel economy and creating opportunities for corruption and illicit trade. This has further undermined the effectiveness of the sanctions in promoting good governance and democratic values in discussed space. By facilitating corruption and an underground market, the sanctions inadvertently weakened the rule of law and good governance in Zimbabwe, as the ruling elite and their associates became more involved in illegal activities to sustain their power and wealth. This erosion of democratic values and institutions made it even more challenging for the international community to promote meaningful change in the country.

## **7. Criticisms and limitations of past sanctions on Zimbabwe**

### ***7.1. Unintended socio-economic consequences***

Another major criticism of the past sanctions on Zimbabwe is their unintended socio-economic consequences. While the sanctions were intended to exert pressure on the political elite, they inadvertently had broader and wider impacts on Zimbabwe's economy and society. The sanctions may have contributed to the exacerbation of the country's economic crisis,

characterized by hyperinflation, high unemployment, and widespread poverty (Mlambo, 2014, p. 293). Critics argue that the most vulnerable segments of the population, including the poor, women, and children, were disproportionately affected by these adverse economic conditions, while the political elite remained largely shielded from the impacts (Mlambo, 2014, p. 293; Raftopoulos and Savage, 2004). In short, even if sanctions are targeted, in the case of Zimbabwe – as in the majority of other cases - they seem to have missed the mark.

One of the most immediate and visible effects of the sanctions was the decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) and international aid, which had been crucial financing lifelines for Zimbabwe's development (Chitiga & Chitiga-Mabugu, 2011, p. 3). As Western governments and multilateral institutions tightened their financial restrictions on the country, the flow of FDI and aid dwindled, thereby deepening the economic crisis and leading to widespread job losses, business closures, and a general decline in living standards (Mlambo, 2014, p. 295). The economy's contraction, coupled with the hyperinflation that plagued Zimbabwe in the mid-2000s, further eroded the purchasing power of ordinary citizens, pushing millions over the edge of poverty (Hanke & Kwok, 2009, p. 353).

The negative socio-economic consequences of the sanctions were not limited to the macroeconomic level; they also had severe repercussions for the provision of essential public services such as health and education. As the government's fiscal space shrunk, it struggled to maintain adequate funding for these sectors as to keep them afloat, leading to the deterioration of healthcare infrastructure and the collapse of the public education system (Ogbonna, 2017). The healthcare sector, in particular, suffered from chronic shortages of essential drugs, medical supplies, and trained personnel, resulting in an alarming increase in morbidity and mortality rates, especially among the most vulnerable sections of the population (Tibaijuka, 2005, p. 38). The education sector, once one of Zimbabwe's sources of pride, also witnessed a dramatic decline in enrollment and retention rates, with the quality of teaching and learning significantly decreasing, as schools struggled to cope with the twin challenges of reduced funding and economic instability (Chitiga & Chitiga-Mabugu, 2011, p. 11).

Sanctions had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable groups in Zimbabwe, such as women, children, and the elderly, who bore the brunt of the economic downturn and the collapse of social services (Sachikonye, 2011, p. 24). For instance, the decline in household

incomes and the unweaving of Zimbabwe's social safety net led upticks in child labor, as families sought alternative sources of income to make ends meet (Tibaijuka, 2005, p. 40). Women, too, faced spiraling economic and social pressures, as they were often forced to assume additional responsibilities as primary breadwinners and caregivers in the face of rising unemployment and the disintegration of traditional support structures (Sachikonye, 2011, p. 24).

In addition to the social and economic hardships faced by the most vulnerable groups, the sanctions further augmented income inequality in Zimbabwe. As the country's economic conditions aggravated, the gap between the wealthy elite, who were often connected to the ruling regime, and the rest of the population widened. This growing inequality not only deepened social divisions but also fueled resentment and mistrust among the population, undermining the prospects for national reconciliation and inclusive development (Dendere, 2022, pp. 81-82). Social cohesion was sacrificed on the altar of individual hustle.

The agricultural sector, which had been the backbone of the Zimbabwean economy<sup>2</sup>, was also severely affected by the sanctions. Although land reform was a major driver of the economic crisis, the sanctions further hampered the agricultural sector's recovery by restricting access to international markets, credit, and technical assistance (Moyo & Yeros, 2007). This, in turn, contributed to the decline in agricultural productivity and food security, exacerbating rural poverty and increasing the country's dependence on food aid (Mbanje and Mahuku, 2011). Zimbabwe grew reliant on food imports to meet its population's needs.

In conclusion, the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe have had far-reaching negative socio-economic consequences for the country, contributing to the decline in foreign investment, the deterioration of public services, and the exacerbation of poverty and inequality. While the primary objective of these measures was to promote democratic reform and protect human rights, their broader impact on the Zimbabwean economy and society has been largely counterproductive, further entrenching the misery and suffering of the population.

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<sup>2</sup> Zimbabwe had been named in the past "Africa's breadbasket" as it used to be a major exporter of grain, especially maize and wheat, as well as other agricultural products like tobacco.

## 7.2. *Strengthening the regime's grip on power*

One way the sanctions strengthened the regime's grip on power was by providing a rallying point for domestic support. The Mugabe regime framed the sanctions as evidence of Western imperialism and interference, thereby portraying itself as a victim defending national sovereignty (Weisfelder, 2008). By positioning itself as a bulwark against external aggression, the regime was able to mobilize support from various segments of society, including war veterans, civil servants, and rural communities (Mlambo, 2014, p. 294). Mugabe was skillful in portraying the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe as a manifestation of Western imperialism. By doing so, he tapped into the historical memory of colonialism and the struggle for independence, creating a narrative that resonated with many Zimbabweans (Petrica, 2016a). This portrayal of the sanctions allowed Mugabe to present his regime as a defender of national sovereignty, standing firm against unwarranted foreign attempts to subdue and shackle economically. This was not a new discursive exercise. Throughout his rule, Mugabe had maintained a strong anti-Western rhetoric, often accusing Western powers of attempting to undermine Zimbabwe's sovereignty. He used the sanctions as evidence of this interference, asserting that they were designed to weaken the nation and impose foreign, non-African values on Zimbabwean society, thus constituting an attempt from the old masters to keep the country latched to them. This narrative enabled Mugabe to project strength and assert his commitment to defending the nation from external threats. Sanctions became a rallying point to unite disparate factions within Zimbabwe against a common enemy, the Western powers imposing said punitive measures. By successfully framing the sanctions as an existential threat to the nation, ZANU-PF were able to forge a sense of national unity, diverting attention away from domestic issues and grievances. This strategy further consolidated their power and slowly neutralized potential challenges to their rule. Mugabe then used the sanctions as a tool to discredit the opposition and create doubts about their intentions and loyalties. He accused opposition groups and critics of being agents of Western imperialism, suggesting that they were collaborating with foreign powers to destabilize Zimbabwe. This narrative undermined the credibility of the opposition and made it difficult for them to gain widespread support among the population.

Another way in which the sanctions reinforced the regime's grip on power was by enabling it to consolidate control over resources and the distribution of patronage. As international isolation and economic decline took their toll, the regime increasingly relied on patronage networks to maintain loyalty and support. The sanctions provided the regime with a pretext to seize control of key economic sectors, such as agriculture and mining, thereby increasing its ability to allocate resources to loyalists and suppress dissent (Mlambo, 2014, p. 293). This was most evident in the controversial land reform program that saw the redistribution of land from white commercial farmers to black Zimbabweans, many of whom were politically connected (Petrica, 2020a, pp. 80-92). The regime justified these actions as necessary steps to counter the effects of the sanctions and rectify historical injustices, further reinforcing its nationalist credentials. By taking control of key economic sectors, the regime increased its ability to allocate resources to loyalists, thereby bolstering its support base and indirectly suppressing dissent. The distribution of patronage, in the form of land, mining concessions, and government contracts, served to create a network of beneficiaries dependent on the regime for their economic well-being, survival even. Systemic patronage allowed the regime to maintain power by co-opting potential opponents and rewarding loyalty, even in the face of economic collapse and international isolation.

In terms of handling dissent, Mugabe didn't limit himself to portraying his direct political opponents as foreign loyalists. Sanctions acted as enablers for the regime to intensify its repression of the opposition under the guise of national security. As the Mugabe regime faced increasing international pressure, it responded by cracking down on opposition parties, civil society organizations, and media outlets, accusing all of the former of collaborating with foreign powers to destabilize the country (Weisfelder, 2008, p. 459). ZANU-PF created a sense of urgency and an imminent threat to the nation. By framing the sanctions as an attempt by foreign powers to undermine the country's sovereignty and impose serfdom, the regime was able to implement increasingly draconian measures against all its enemies and portray said measures as vital for national security. Dissent was clamped down on with an air of legitimacy, thereby making it difficult for opposition groups to challenge any governmental action. Faced with sanctions, the regime also capitalized on the opportunity to consolidate its control over information and communication channels. By accusing media outlets and their journalists of

being Western collaborators, the increasingly autocratic Mugabe was able to censor critical voices and control the narrative surrounding the sanctions and their impact on Zimbabwe (Weisfelder, 2008, p. 459). This manipulation of information further reinforced the regime's hold on power by ensuring that the public was exposed primarily to pro-government narratives – a move straight out of Herman and Chomsky's (1988) playbook. Leaving no stone unturned, Mugabe and his acolytes also targeted civil society organizations, which often played a crucial role in advocating for human rights and democratic reforms (Petrica, 2020b). By labelling organizations agents of foreign interests, the regime was able to stifle their efforts and limit their influence on the political landscape. This repression further entrenched the regime's power by neutralizing potential sources of resistance and opposition. Thus, internally, the imposition of sanctions gave birth to a popular mobilization to fight an external threat.

Externally, the sanctions allowed the regime to exploit regional solidarity and resist external pressure for democratic reforms. Zimbabwe's neighbors in the SADC were divided over the issue of sanctions, with some countries, such as South Africa and Botswana, adopting more conciliatory approaches, while others, like Angola and Namibia, expressing strong support for the Mugabe regime (Mlambo, 2014, p. 294). This lack of a unified regional stance undermined the effectiveness of the sanctions and enabled the regime to maintain its grip on power. South Africa – the regional hegemon was mostly ambivalent towards Mugabe throughout the period because its foreign policy interests clashed with the West's demands for democratization in Zimbabwe (Petrica, 2020a).

As the SADC attempted to mediate the political crisis in Zimbabwe, the divisions among its member states provided Mugabe with opportunities to exploit these differences and resist calls for political reforms (Nathan, 2012, p. 53). The organization's inability to forge a cohesive approach to the Zimbabwean crisis enabled the regime to deflect external pressure and maintain its tight grip on power (Alden & Alao, 2008, p. 204).

South Africa, as a regional power, played a pivotal role in shaping the regional response to the Zimbabwean crisis. Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's president at the time, pursued a policy of "quiet diplomacy" with the Mugabe regime, arguing that open confrontation and criticism would be counterproductive (Petrica, 2016b). Instead, Mbeki sought to encourage dialogue and

negotiation between the ruling ZANU-PF party and the opposition's MDC as a way to resolve the crisis.

Botswana, on the other hand, adopted a more critical stance towards Mugabe's regime, often voicing concerns over human rights abuses and the deteriorating political and economic situation in Zimbabwe (Nathan, 2012, p. 111). However, Botswana's limited regional influence, compared to South Africa, meant that its calls for stronger action against the Zimbabwean government did not gain much traction within SADC.

Angola and Namibia, both of which had historical ties with Zimbabwe due to their shared struggle against colonial rule, expressed strong support for Mugabe (Mlambo, 2014, p. 294), succumbing to the view that sanctions were an attempt by Western powers to interfere in Zimbabwe's internal affairs and undermine its ability to rule itself.

The varying responses of SADC members to the Zimbabwean crisis weakened the overall effectiveness of the sanctions. The divisions within the organization made it difficult to adopt a coordinated regional approach to the crisis, allowing the Mugabe regime to resist pressure for democratic reforms (Nathan, 2012, p. 145). Furthermore, the absence of consensus within SADC also limited the organization's ability to influence the positions of key international actors, such as the United Nations, the EU, and the United States, thereby further reducing the impact of the sanctions (Nathan, 2012, p. 146).

The regime also benefited from the solidarity of other African countries and regional organizations, such as the AU, which criticized the sanctions as an infringement on Zimbabwe's sovereignty and a form of neo-colonialism (Scoones *et al.*, 2011, p. 98). This support further strengthened Mugabe's position and helped to legitimize his resistance to external pressure for democratic reforms.

### **7.3. *Lackluster coordination and enforcement***

The issue of inadequate coordination and enforcement of sanctions is a critical factor when assessing their effectiveness. In Zimbabwe's case, as in many others, the lack of a cohesive international approach, divergent policies among Zimbabwe's regional neighbors, and weak enforcement mechanisms have undermined the potential impact of the sanctions.

One of the main challenges in implementing effective sanctions on Zimbabwe has been the lack of a cohesive and coordinated international response. The sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union lacked universal support, leading to inconsistent application and enforcement. This inconsistency has undermined the overall impact of the sanctions and allowed ZANU-PF to exploit divisions within the international community. Unilateral sanctions are, of course less effective than multilateral sanctions, given that targeted countries can exploit differences in policies and seek alternative markets and allies to evade sanctions (Eaton & Engers, 1996, p. 327); but multilateral sanctions that fail to include large global actors could provide just enough maneuver space for individuals, organizations and entire regimes. For instance, in our case, important international actors like China and Russia have been less willing to support stringent measures against Zimbabwe, often citing concerns over national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs (Taylor, 2009, p. 198). While we will not delve on the subject, the underlying geopolitical and economic reasons for such decisions taken by authoritarian regimes with international order reshuffling ambitions should be evident. The absence of a united global front has weakened the pressure on the regime in Harare to implement democratic reforms and respect human rights.

The enforcement of sanctions also plays a crucial role in determining their successful outcomes. Early and Wallis (2015, p. 70) emphasize that weak enforcement mechanisms often allow targeted entities to find ways to circumvent the sanctions, thereby reducing their overall effectiveness. Weak enforcement mechanisms have also contributed to the limited effectiveness of the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe (Gordon, 2010, p. 320). For example, loopholes in the enforcement of targeted measures, such as travel bans and asset freezes, allowed some individuals to evade the sanctions (Hufbauer *et al.*, 2007, p. 157). The ease with which these targeted individuals could circumvent the measures raised questions about the overall effectiveness of the sanctions regime in this particular case, while adding to the extensive body of literature arguing that sanctions generally fail (Drezner, 2011, p. 98).

Moreover, in Zimbabwe's case, the reliance on voluntary compliance by third-party states in enforcing economic sanctions has further weakened their impact (Hufbauer *et al.*, 2007, p. 131) Such cooperation is not always guaranteed of course, as countries may have differing strategic interests or economic ties with the targeted country (Cortright & Lopez, 2000, p. 15).



Nonetheless, cooperation among countries can lead to "sanctions busting" activities, whereby third-party countries undermine the sanctions by continuing to trade with the targeted country (Biersteker *et al.*, 2016, p. 9) and even increasing trade and financial flows to compensate.

The lack of a robust enforcement mechanism has undermined the credibility of the sanctions and their ability to bring about meaningful change in Zimbabwe. As a general note, the lack of a strong international legal framework for enforcing sanctions can further limit their impact, and this can be observed in the case of Zimbabwe.

In addition, the negative consequences of the sanctions on the Zimbabwean population have been widely debated. While the sanctions were designed to target specific individuals and entities associated with the Mugabe regime, they have inadvertently contributed to the country's economic decline, exacerbating the suffering of ordinary Zimbabweans. The humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Zimbabwe, marked by food shortages, hyperinflation, and widespread poverty, has raised questions in terms of sanctions morality and efficacy as a tool for bringing about political change. A recent United Nations (2022) report finds that sanctions, including secondary sanctions, and different forms of overcompliance by foreign banks and companies have had a significant impact on the ordinary Zimbabweans.

In conclusion, the inadequate coordination and enforcement of sanctions on Zimbabwe have significantly limited their effectiveness in achieving the desired political change. The fragmented international response, coupled with divergent regional policies and weak enforcement mechanisms, have allowed the Mugabe regime to maintain its grip on power and resist external pressure for democratic reforms. Future efforts to address such crises – in Zimbabwe and elsewhere - should focus on fostering a more coordinated and comprehensive approach, addressing enforcement challenges, and finding ways to minimize the unintended negative consequences on the civilian population. In more recent times, especially since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a lot have been achieved in terms of coordination, enforcement and evasion curtailing – even so, the system is arguably still lacking. But this wider topic will be treated for another time.

To achieve a more coordinated and comprehensive approach, the international community must work towards building consensus on the objectives and methods of sanctions. Both are still elusive. This may involve engaging with countries that have been reluctant to

support stringent measures, such as China<sup>3</sup>, to explore common ground and develop a unified strategy (Taylor, 2009, p. 205). Furthermore, enhancing cooperation and coordination among the countries imposing sanctions, as well as with regional organizations such as the SADC and AU, is essential to ensure that the measures are consistently applied and enforced. For this, multilateral efforts must be complemented by bilateral negotiation.

Addressing enforcement challenges also requires strengthening the mechanisms for monitoring and implementing sanctions. This may include enhancing the capacity of relevant institutions and agencies to identify and track targeted individuals and entities, as well as closing loopholes that allow them to evade the measures. Additionally, promoting greater transparency and accountability in the enforcement process can help to bolster the credibility of the sanctions and enhance their effectiveness (Hufbauer *et al.*, 2007, p. 134).

Lastly, efforts should be made to minimize the unintended negative consequences of the sanctions on the Zimbabwean population. This may involve refining the design of the sanctions to ensure that they are more targeted and do not inadvertently contribute to the country's economic decline. Moreover, the international community should support humanitarian initiatives aimed at alleviating the suffering of ordinary Zimbabweans and addressing the root causes of the crisis, such as poor governance, corruption, and human rights abuses.

By addressing these challenges, the international community can enhance the effectiveness of sanctions in promoting political change in Zimbabwe, and ultimately contribute to the country's transition towards a more democratic and prosperous future.

#### **7.4. *Failure to address the root causes of the crisis***

Another key criticism of past sanctions on Zimbabwe is their limited effectiveness in achieving the intended political objectives. The sanctions aimed to pressure the government to implement democratic reforms and improve human rights conditions (Hufbauer *et al.*, 2007, p. 219).

The targeted nature of the sanctions limited in their scope and impact, but not consequences. The sanctions were primarily directed at individuals and entities associated with

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<sup>3</sup> And Russia, presuming that Russia's isolation from the global system will not remain indefinite.

the ruling party, ZANU-PF, and were designed to pressure the government to implement democratic reforms and address human rights abuses, at least according to European Union claims (2002). Despite implications on the civilian population – particularly the poor, as previously explained, the narrow focus of these measures failed to address the broader structural issues that underpinned the crisis, such as the unequal distribution of land and wealth, the erosion of democratic institutions, and the politicization of the state apparatus (Sachikonye, 2011, pp. 25-27).

Also, the sanctions inadvertently provided the regime in Harare with a convenient scapegoat for the country's economic woes. Instead of prompting introspection and reform, the West's punitive measures allowed the government to deflect blame for the deteriorating economic situation onto external forces, thereby avoiding responsibility for the crisis (Mandaza, 2011, pp. 122-123). As previously claimed, this narrative of foreign interference resonated with an important segment of the population, particularly those who had experienced the horrendous effects of colonialism and viewed the sanctions as an extension of this sort of historical injustice (Raftopoulos, 2006, pp. 194-195).

While targeted, the sanctions did not sufficiently target the regime's sources of revenue and support, which allowed it to continue financing its patronage networks and coercive practices. The regime was able to circumvent the sanctions through various means, such as illicit trade in diamonds and other natural resources, which provided it with the necessary financial flows and resources to maintain its grip on power (Global Witness, 2012, pp. 13-15).

Critics also argue that the sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe failed to address the root causes of the political and economic crisis in the country (Mlambo, 2014, p. 295). The sanctions focused primarily on the symptoms of the crisis, such as human rights abuses and electoral malpractices, rather than addressing the underlying issues, including land reform, governance, and economic mismanagement. Consequently, the sanctions were unable to foster a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the country's multifaceted problems.

One of the major challenges facing Zimbabwe during the crisis was the controversial land reform program. While the program aimed to redress historical inequalities in land distribution, it was marred by widespread violence, corruption, and the displacement of both black and white farmers (Sachikonye, 2003, p. 34). The sanctions, however, did not directly

address the issue of land reform, which continued to fuel political instability and economic decline (Petrica, 2020a, pp. 80-92). Furthermore, the measures not effectively tackle the governance issues at the core of the crisis. ZANU-PF maintained a tight grip on power through the manipulation of state institutions and the suppression of dissent (Raftopoulos, 2009, p. 757). The sanctions targeted individuals and entities associated with the regime, but these measures did not result in significant improvements in governance or the protection of human rights, arguably leading to further contraction of Zimbabwe's democratic space as the regime used the sanctions as a pretext for cracking down on the opposition, further diminishing the prospects for political change (Weisfelder, 2008, p. 459).

Economic mismanagement was another root cause of the crisis that the sanctions failed to address. Zimbabwe's economy was characterized by high inflation (Petrica, 2020a, pp. 130-131), widespread poverty, and a crumbling infrastructure (Chitiga & Chitiga-Mabugu, 2011, p. 9). The sanctions, while aimed at pressuring the regime to change its policies, did not directly target the underlying economic issues, such as the lack of fiscal discipline, corruption, and the (sometimes malevolently) inefficient allocation of resources.

One can conclude that sanctions imposed on Zimbabwe failed to address the root causes of the political and economic crisis, focusing instead on the symptoms of the crisis. The limitations of the sanctions in addressing land reform, governance issues, and economic mismanagement, coupled with the lack of a coordinated international response, ultimately rendered the measures ineffective in fostering a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the country's problems.

#### **7.5. *Negative impact on regional relations***

The implementation of sanctions on Zimbabwe has also been criticized for its negative impact on the country's relations with other states, particularly in the region (Mlambo, 2014, p. 294). The sanctions created tensions between Zimbabwe and its neighbors, some of which were reluctant to support the measures, citing concerns about national sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs (Weisfelder, 2008, p. 462). This, in turn, limited the effectiveness of the sanctions in mobilizing a coordinated regional response to the crisis in Zimbabwe.

Countries such as South Africa, Angola, and Namibia, which have historical ties with Zimbabwe, emphasized the importance of respecting the principles of sovereignty and non-interference enshrined in the AU and the Southern African SADC charters (Nathan, 2012, p. 48).

Alongside concerns over sovereignty, regional actors were also wary of the potential economic repercussions of the sanctions. Zimbabwe's neighbors feared that the collapse of the Zimbabwean economy, partly attributed to the sanctions, could have destabilizing effects on the region (Siderius, 2008, p. 54). The sanctions disrupted regional trade, as countries that were economically interdependent with Zimbabwe experienced negative spillover effects due to the decline in cross-border commerce (Alden & Soko, 2005, p. 375).

The case of Zimbabwe's sanctions highlights the complexities and challenges of using economic statecraft to address political crises in the context of regional politics. The concerns of national sovereignty, non-interference, and regional stability, as well as the persistence of economic interdependence, have limited the ability of the sanctions to achieve their intended goals (Mlambo, 2014, p. 294; Weisfelder, 2008, p. 462). This, in turn, raises important questions about the efficacy of sanctions as a policy tool in resolving political crises and promoting democratic change in the region.

## **8. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the imposition of sanctions on Zimbabwe has been and still remains a controversial and highly debated issue. Past sanctions have been criticized on multiple grounds, including their limited effectiveness in achieving political objectives, unintended socio-economic consequences, potential reinforcement of the regime's grip on power, inadequate coordination and enforcement, failure to address the root causes of the crisis, and negative impact on international relations.

Despite these criticisms, it is important to recognize that the sanctions regime was implemented in response to egregious violations of human rights and democratic norms by the Mugabe regime. The sanctions were a response to a crisis that was multifaceted and complex, with deep-seated historical, political, and economic roots. While the sanctions may have had some success in raising awareness of the situation in Zimbabwe, their overall effectiveness in

promoting democratic reforms and improving human rights conditions remains a subject of debate, as is the potency of sanctions in general.

Moving forward, future efforts to address such crises – in Zimbabwe and elsewhere - should focus on fostering a more coordinated and comprehensive approach, addressing enforcement challenges, and finding ways to minimize the unintended negative consequences on the civilian population. The international community must work towards building consensus on the objectives and methods of sanctions, engaging with countries that have been reluctant to support stringent measures, and enhancing cooperation and coordination among the countries imposing sanctions, as well as with regional organizations such as the SADC and AU, to ensure that the measures are consistently applied and enforced if sanctions in Zimbabwe are maintained even at the current low levels. As the West is working towards a paradigm shift with regards to concerted sanction imposition and enforcement, especially in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it will be interesting to observe how lessons learned therein will be applied when it comes to countries such as Zimbabwe, that don't possess Russia's power, standing and ambition.

Furthermore, addressing enforcement challenges requires strengthening the mechanisms for monitoring and implementing sanctions. This may include enhancing the capacity of relevant institutions and agencies to identify and track targeted individuals and entities, as well as closing loopholes that allow them to evade the measures. Additionally, promoting greater transparency and accountability in the enforcement process can help to bolster the credibility of the sanctions and enhance their effectiveness.

Efforts should also be made to minimize the unintended negative consequences of the sanctions on the Zimbabwean population. This may involve refining the design of the punitive measures to ensure that they are more targeted and do not inadvertently continue to contribute to the country's economic decline. Moreover, the international community should support humanitarian initiatives aimed at alleviating the suffering of ordinary Zimbabweans and addressing the root causes of the crisis, such as poor governance, corruption, and human rights abuses. While this is the portrayed purpose of sanctions, more needs to be done, as previously argued.

Finally, it is essential to note that the issue of sanctions is not isolated to Zimbabwe, and similar crises continue to occur in other parts of the world. Therefore, the lessons learned from Zimbabwe must inform future efforts to address such crises in a more coordinated, effective, and sustainable manner. The challenge lies in striking a balance between ensuring accountability for egregious violations of human rights and promoting democratic reforms, while minimizing the negative consequences on civilian populations and fostering a comprehensive and sustainable solution to the underlying issues fueling the crisis.

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